

AT: BY
RANDOM



BY L. F. AUSTIN



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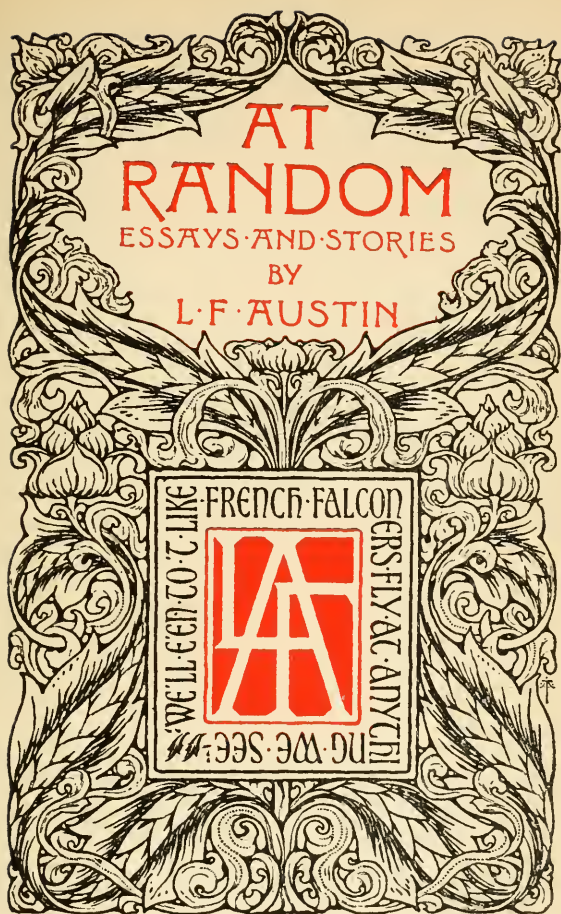
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AT RANDOM



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To
SIR WEMYSS REID,
WITH MUCH REGARD.

1/13/20

PREFACE.

A friend, in whose judgment I have great faith, has enjoined me to write a preface. "It will have the advantage," he says, "of putting the character of your work well in the forefront. The reader will catch the quality of it at the outset; the reviewer who, believe me, does not, as most people imagine, enjoy the stern and relentless quest of the author's meaning, will seize it at once without the fatigue of research. Rest assured that a preface is the hall-mark of your adventure."

I have deferred to this counsel with some misgiving. Putting one's significance in the forefront of the battle seems to invite the fate of Uriah. He left a beautiful widow to receive royal consolation; but if I am cut off in the preface, who is to console this little book in its bereavement? Besides, the very title excludes the idea of such a piece of synthetic philosophy as a preface ought to be. What message can be culled from these random humours? The only pretence to philosophic gravity is in the marginal headings—finger-posts which the reviewer may find sufficiently luminous without exploring the adjacent country. I hope he will be propitiated by this delicate solicitude for his comfort.

A journalist who has given much of his time to the solemn recitation of facts in unwilling ears, who rattles the bones of statistics over the stones of public opinion, may take his fill now and then of whimsical fantasy by way of recreation. Like the urchin who, one day in the year, is whirled away from the sordid prose of court and alley into the reckless profusion of flowers and butterflies with which Nature, when she can, spoils the children of the rates, that journalist may overdo his holiday from Blue-books and leading articles in a bewildering spread of metaphor. This, perhaps, is the inner meaning of "At Random"; at any rate, the suggestion is meekly submitted to the critical colossus who may be tempted to bestride the poppies.

To Sir Wemyss Reid, one of the editors who have encouraged these fantastic excursions, I dedicate this volume, which owes much to "The Speaker"; to the other, Mr. Clement Shorter, I desire to make a grateful acknowledgment of the kindness and patience (not unmixed with wonder and alarm) with which he has watched a certain page of "The Sketch" for the greater part of two years.

L. F. A.

September, 1896.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
A MARCH MEDITATION	I
THE LONDON GONDOLIER	6
SINGULAR BEHAVIOUR OF QUOTATIONS	13
A PATRON OF BARBERS	19
TO HEAVEN IN MY BOOTS!	27
ON A CERTAIN NOTABLE FIRE	36
THE NEW ZEALANDER COMES	42
THE NEW MAN	50
ON THE ART OF NOT GROWING OLD	57
A DISINTERESTED REVIEWER	64
THE OLD YEAR AND THE NEW	71
A MARKED MAN	77
IN PRAISE OF CIDER	84
AN OLD SCHOOLMASTER	90
A WATER BABY	97
A COMEDY OF SIGNPOSTS	105
THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY	112

	PAGE
ON BOHEMIANS	127
A DOVE-LIKE INTERVIEWER	134
THE SILENT ONLOOKER	140
ON A CERTAIN QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA	150
SOME EXPERIENCES OF PHOTOGRAPHY	161
ON CHRISTMAS NUMBERS	170
ON THE PERILS OF AN AMATEUR ACTOR	179
THE ONLY MAN IN TOWN	185
AN OLD PLAYGOER	194
MY FRIEND JUDSON	200
JUDSON ON DRAMATIC CRITICISM	209
CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF JUDSON	214
JUDSON AS A DOG FANCIER	222
TO WINIFRED EVANS	231
ON MURAL TABLETS	239
THE AFTER-DINNER ORATOR	247
AT OLIVIA'S CLUB	254

AT RANDOM.



A MARCH MEDITATION.

*James
Thomson's
omission.*

IT was the Surveyor-General of the Leeward Islands, courtier of the Muses in the intervals of a snug sinecure, who invoked the "ethereal mildness" of Spring to inspire him with moral lessons for the youth which is apt to be too impulsive at this season. He forgot to extend his warning to middle-age, which is in no humour to be a mere looker-on when "gentle Spring" descends in "a shower of shadowing roses." This omission on Mr. Thomson's part occurred to me as I sat the other evening on the terrace of the "Star and Garter," and watched the green tints just beginning to shimmer on the river. The trees are nearly all sombre still; but here and there the saucy bud flecks the gloom with promise, like the first dash of colour in a widow's array. I can imagine no spectacle more soothing to the spirit threatened by

A MARCH MEDITATION.

pessimism. In the first place, it reminds you that even middle-age has its subdivisions. There is the early middle, and there is the late middle. If you consider it carefully, there is a whole series of stages before you reach the point which a rude vocabulary would call incipient senility. Now, if you belong by any process of persuasion to the early middle, I defy you to watch the springtime shooting through the mass of wood, waking the most sober and inert trunk to vitality, weaving that tracery of light and life from branch to branch, without feeling an irrepressible satisfaction stealing through your veins.

The guile of middle-age. The spell does not work at any other time. It is no use coming here in the height of the season, when the terrace is thronged by people obtrusively younger than yourself, and when wood and river are wrapt in an overpowering splendour which, like the superior flow of animal spirits in some social rival, makes you feel snappish. For your ageing pessimist gets into that curious state when he is jealous of Nature, and her full-blooded effects give him a sense of personal affront. But nurse your early middle-age on the sights of Spring, when, as the Surveyor-General has it, "the vernal sun awakes the torpid sap." You are all aglow with congenial ardour :

A MARCH MEDITATION.

Nature becomes a subtle flatterer, and time slinks into the background, while you prepare to put forth new leaves. If this philosophy were as widely appreciated as it deserves to be, the terrace at Richmond would swarm, in such an insinuating March as this, with middle-aged men growing visibly younger every hour, and scoffing at the warning :

“Wait till you come to forty year.”

*A judicious
recreation.*

Nor is this the end of the prescription. Perhaps it is only the plutocrat who can jaunt down to the “Star and Garter,” where the ceremony of dinner is an inexorable tradition. Your early middle - age can find gratuitous refreshment in the Park. But you must choose your morning ; not Sunday, when fashion marches in platoons, but one of those rare days with a south-west wind and “a dropping cloud,” just so much threat of rain to moisten the air, and keep a dyed generation within doors. Towards the luncheon hour the Row is almost deserted. A desperate young man with a flushed face and a very awkward mount deprecates your judgment with a sidelong glance of appeal. Girls with flying hair race by on ponies, followed by guardian angels in livery on gigantic bays. A stray member of the proletariat eyes the performance without any comment about the wrongs of

A MARCH MEDITATION.

the unemployed. A mounted policeman beams upon the scene, as if law on horseback were the personification of indulgent wisdom. The Serpentine laps its banks with an impetuosity you would scarcely expect from so ancient and artificial a sheet; and the wind—the old, old wind—flicks your face with a dozen drops of rain, and flies just as you did in the days when a runaway knock was the culmination of audacious gaiety. Hawthorn scatters itself in ostentatious profusion, and belts of crocuses seem to be celebrating with highly-coloured festival the total repeal of winter.

Youth eternal. How can your early middle-age
 withstand all these temptations to
believe in eternal youth?

“That is the way that boys begin;
Wait till you come to forty year,”

whispers the monitor; but the reminder seems as idle as the everlasting fallacy that March is the month of bluster, the “roaring moon”—this March which is gently flipping your ear, and spreading sweet intoxication through your blood! Why, as you turn out of the Park into Piccadilly a great blaze of violets in a basket bursts upon your vision, and, in a twinkling, your button-hole is brilliant with a nosegay. That is the moment when middle-age

A MARCH MEDITATION.

becomes transcendental. If you have been in the habit, as a young man, of wearing flowers, you have spoilt yourself for a unique experience ; but if you have practised self-denial, and saved this joy for the coat of middle-age, you can tread the pavement with an exaltation which will strike envy into the bosom of the jaded young *habitué* of the clubs.

*Illusion and
awakening.*

This morning the whole length of Piccadilly seems radiant with violets. There is a joyous conspiracy to deck the streets with colour. The day is still grey, but you do not crave for sunshine : that would make the scene too brilliant, and excite a misgiving in your mind that you are not so young after all. But the whole town is sufficiently gay to sustain your spirit of participation. Fashion itself abets the illusion, for Spring seems to be gliding in front of you in a woman's shape, with bright velvet sleeves on a dark dress, looking like the tender hue which breaks through the Richmond woods. No wonder you enter your club with a jaunty step, and fancy you see envious surprise in the eye of a casual acquaintance who, poor man ! is evidently failing fast. You survive the greeting of a sportive friend, who addresses you as "old buck " with a slightly satirical emphasis ; but you find your Sedan amongst your letters. It is an invitation to dinner—a dinner of

THE LONDON GONDOLIER.

fogies whose period it is a stretch of courtesy to call even the late middle.

“Then you know the worth of a lass,
Then you know a boy is an——”

Well—perhaps ; but on such a violet morning your friends might have spared you the suggestion that you are verging towards the antique side of mediæval fogeydom.

THE LONDON GONDOLIER.

Cabby on strike. THOUGH unversed in economic subjects, and always bewildered by strikes—which incarnate themselves, to my fancy, in monumental busybodies who spout from waggons to banner-waving myriads, gladly cheering the articulation of discontent, however vague—I confess to a very lively sympathy with Cabby. I have been looking at him from the club window and graciously acknowledging his greeting. As a rule, the spectator at the club window hears no good of himself from processions of strikers on their way to the Park. There is Jones, for instance, who despises the proletariat, and is wont to remark on such occasions : “Look at these idle loafers, pre-

THE LONDON GONDOLIER.

tending they want work ! ” ; and then the passing crowd, guessing Jones’s sentiments by intuition, with the aid of his expressive features and a gleam of professional insolence from his glasses, bursts into a howl. But to-day this animosity gives place to good fellowship. Cabby catches sight of me, and calls for three cheers, as if he knew me to be a generous patron, tolerant of occasionally ill-smelling vehicles and tottering quadrupeds, and apt to stretch a shilling fare into eighteenpence.

I inspire him.

Now, to a retiring man this kind of popularity is undeniably gratifying. I cannot take it with the nonchalance of the golden youth on the club steps opposite, who snuffs up the incense with an Olympian air, as of a prosperous deity accustomed to drive daily through the firmament in a celestial hansom. But it is pleasing to note that by some strikers, at all events, the denizens of Clubland are not marked down for destruction when the Social Revolution comes by its own. I feel a glow of subdued enthusiasm, as if I, too, were a tribune, who by a magical glance from a club window had inspired the people with new faith in the brotherhood of man. Under the influence of this idea I perform a sacrificial act. For years I have cherished ill-will against the cabby who, receiving a sovereign from me one

THE LONDON GONDOLIER.

night in lieu of a shilling, took advantage of that rapt condition in which a man's mind is astrally uplifted by the festival of kindred souls. By the prosaic light of the morrow's sun I discovered the deed, and thenceforward I was a prey to suspicion of the whole race of cabmen. But the acclamation which greeted me at the club window expelled that poison from my mind, and in the ardour of this new-born trust I had almost hailed a "growler," and bidden the weather-beaten veteran on the box to drive me just where he pleased for any fare he chose to name.

*The Mercury of
the hansom.*

In such a spirit who would not be willing to consider Cabby as a special kind of mortal, a minister to our needs, who must not be judged like common men—light porters, man-servants, or what not—a Mercury new-lighted on the perch of a hansom, taking toll of us without strict regard to the statutory charges for hackney carriages? When you think of it, there is something in his calling which raises him above the vulgar lot. I had a disagreeable shock when I saw him plodding in the procession. There was an indignity in the harsh necessity which, for the nonce, compelled him to walk; his very badge seemed to have suffered eclipse; and the bit of ribbon which he wore in sportive defiance of

THE LONDON GONDOLIER.

insensate cab-proprietors gave a touch of mockery to his fallen estate. To divorce a cabman from his cab, and sacrifice him to those despotic twins, Supply and Demand—the Gog and Magog of economics—seems to me, in my present mood of exaltation, a most unnatural act.

*London
without him !* I read that Cabby is being gradually forced out of the social system by the competition of omnibuses and tramcars ; but who can imagine a cabless London—London stuffed into vans like so much furniture, “six on each side”—London rolling stolidly to its business or pleasure, bunched like candles ? Have the economists ever considered the moving drama of the hansom, the multitude of affairs which transact themselves between two wheels, revolving silently through the night, the tragi-comedy of life which finds no scope save in the flying moments of a shilling fare ? What of the journeys which begin in lovers’ meetings, go on to quarrel, reunion, distraction, triumph, and defeat, all under the small roof over which sits Cabby, impartial as fate, though sometimes moved to the satisfaction of Asmodean curiosity through the trap ? What of the joy of threading the whirl and turmoil of the streets, glancing through rain-lashed panes at the phantasmagoria of glittering lamps and swiftly-

THE LONDON GONDOLIER.

scudding shapes, the lurid shreds and snatches from the Witches' Sabbath of the great city? Imagine London robbed of all this, and weltering in the straw of the omnibus or the noisome publicity of the tram? Is it any wonder that the picture stimulates my enthusiasm for Cabby to the point of a resolution never to sink so low as his legal payment? How can you class him with the successful swain in "Polly Perkins"—heavens! what grizzling years have passed over my head since that song was new!—I mean the "bow-legged conductor of a twopenny 'bus"? Who would give that minion a drachma more than his due? Pray, what sentiment or common privacy is there in the moving sarcophagus which lurches down Regent Street, exhaling mortuary odours, and dropping bodies which stagger about for awhile before they recover life and animation?

*His engaging
manners.* I could continue these interrogatories for ever; but they are already sufficient to establish the conviction in my mind that Cabby is a superior being, unaccountable to ordinary laws, indispensable to the subtlest sensations of our lives. His very manners show the rare distinction of his birthright. His gifts of argument and repartee stamp him as a man apart. Listen to his altercations with the omnibus-driver,

THE LONDON GONDOLIER.

whose inferior clay is always resentfully vociferous. What shaft of sarcasm has ever rankled in your withers like that of Cabby, when you have dropped into the palm extended to you from a majestic altitude the lonely and trumpery shilling? You may have listened to the barbed irony of a political opponent in the House without a tremor; but what were your feelings when the front door opened, and, for the benefit of the footman, the Parthian of the cab launched his arrow of disdain into the small of your back? Did you wonder whether this part of you was visibly smaller?

*His inde-
pendence.*

I have no doubt that a certain dread of Cabby mingles with the generosity which habitually overpays him. He contrives in an indefinable manner to make you think that he drives a cab for his own pleasure, that he is a free-lance of the highway, that he condescends to stand on a rank, or take his meals in a "shelter," but that he is something between a Roman charioteer and a Bedouin of the desert. When you see him chafing under the restraining gesture of the policeman at the crossing, you half expect him to dash fearlessly through the block and make for the wilds of Wimbledon Common. Personally, I have always looked up to him with a sort of romantic awe, as a figure which represents that older world

THE LONDON GONDOLIER.

of picturesque, semi-barbaric freedom that flourished before we all became qualified to be justices of the peace.

*His mortal
enemy.*

This fancy of mine, I notice, is not shared by womankind. Cabby might indeed be what my imagination paints, were it not that woman contemplates him with the eye of cold calculation. She disapproves his habits, and never pays him a fraction more than his legitimate claim. To her he is a creature who wanders about the streets all night, and encourages weak-minded citizens to remain late at their clubs. If there were no clubs there would be no cabmen ; if there were no cabmen there might be no clubs. This is the ratiocination which runs constantly through the feminine mind. Cabby knows that woman is his remorseless inquisitor, and that man is his indulgent accomplice. Would he have cheered just now if a woman had shown her face at the window ; or would he have slunk by with a hang-dog air ? I feel this part of the theme can get full justice only from the pen of the lady who has proclaimed to the world that she has found man out, and who would soon show that my pleading for Cabby springs from the moral degeneracy from which it is the business of woman to rescue the young Adam.

SINGULAR BEHAVIOUR OF QUOTATIONS.

*A stranger by
the sea of
literature.*

It was a summer afternoon, and a young man who had been toiling for hours over sand hills stood at last upon a crest, where he caught sight of the sea. Weary and footsore as he was, his spirits revived as his eye roved eagerly over the waters. "It is there," he murmured, half in awe, half in triumph, "that great ocean of Literature, whose Attic salt even now runs through my veins. To swim out to the horizon were glory—to swim, perchance to drown ; nay, even death like that were illustrious. To ride upon the waves in that saucy schooner moored to the bookstall pier, or in that three-masted galleon, which seems to be at anchor, and flies so bold a pennon that the legend of Mudie can plainly be discerned in fluttering letters—for either venture I may one day be equipped. But to dip my feet in this inspiring brine, to cleave it with a modest stroke or two, will be enough ; for as yet I am no great swimmer, and prudence bids me keep within my depth."

So he made his way to the shore, took off his shoes and stockings, and sat for awhile with a mantling cheek, inhaling the gently stimulating

SINGULAR BEHAVIOUR OF QUOTATIONS.

air. Then fatigue and the heat of the day overcame him, and in a moment he was fast asleep.

*George Dandin
grips him.*

He awoke with a strange sensation, as of a stifling clasp round his neck. Staggering to his feet, he found that something was seated firmly on his shoulders, while a pair of legs gripped his chest like a vice. After vain efforts to shake the horrible burden off, he gasped—

“Who are you?”

“*Vous l’avez voulu, George Dandin,*” said a voice with a curious chuckle.

“For Heaven’s sake get off—you are strangling me!”

“Softly, softly, young man,” replied the voice tranquilly. “It is useless to struggle—you are mine now. You will come to know me very well by-and-by. I am George Dandin, the Old Man of this literary sea. Ha! you are very young. You want to swim, I daresay, to sport yourself like a fish. All the same, my friend, you must carry me wherever I please. *Vous l’avez voulu, George Dandin.*”

“But I don’t wish it!” exclaimed the victim. “What is George Dandin to me?”

“And you would be a literary man! Fie! Everybody who comes down to this shore has to bear me on his shoulders. What are your books,

SINGULAR BEHAVIOUR OF QUOTATIONS.

your magazine articles, your newspapers, without George Dandin ? They quote him at every turn. *Vous l'avez——*”

“Not that cursed phrase again, I beg !” said the young man, with a violent contortion.

“Ah ! you thought you had thrown me that time. It is no good, my young friend. And the phrase you dislike so soon—it is a very good phrase. You will get used to it ; you will not be able to live without it. Why, I ride upon all your writers. Ha ! I believe half of them do not know what I was or where I come from.”

“Oh, I say !”

“Do you know, *mon ami* ? I make you an offer. Tell me all about myself and I will dismount.”

“You—you are somebody in—in Molière,” said the young man desperately.

“In Molière ! Ha ! very good ; but not what you would call precise, eh ? That they all know—just so much. What happened to me, what I suffered—of all this they are quite ignorant. Somebody in Molière—bah !”

*He is introduced
to Shakespeare.*

At this moment the young man perceived a strange commotion in a piece of seaweed. It reared itself straight and black, then took a human form, draped in a sort of shroud.

SINGULAR BEHAVIOUR OF QUOTATIONS.

“What is it?” asked the youth in alarm.

“Another of us,” responded George Dandin. “You will not find him a gay companion, but he will never leave you. I am somebody in Molière, and he is nobody in Shakespeare. Ha!”

“Behold in me the trappings and the suits of woe,” said the new comer in sepulchral tones. “I am the Play of *Hamlet* with Hamlet Left Out. No journalist can make his bread without my aid. No oratory is complete in my absence. I am the supreme spirit of English letters.”

“But Hamlet himself—where is he?”

“Pooh! he is of no account. A mere comic madman, according to the ripest authorities. The play without him is the thing for the familiar converse of literary allusions. Besides, to know him at all, you must wade through multitudes of theories, and plunge into the slough of German erudition. But I am the soul of simplicity, the constant friend of the ready writer, the classic phrase that never fails to illuminate the baldest page——”

“Softly, softly!” said the voice of Dandin, with some irritation. “You go too far. I expect you to keep your proper place. This youth is under my care, and only one phrase can teach him the true philosophy — *Vous l’avez voulu, George Dandin.*”

“Churlish Gaul!” retorted the shroud, “my

SINGULAR BEHAVIOUR OF QUOTATIONS.

name shall be on the lips of fame when thou liest howling ! ”

In this quarrel the young man began to hope for some chance of escape ; but his heart sank when another shape was suddenly added to the company. This was a lady with a Roman nose and a glance of haughty propriety.

*Antique virtue
claims him.*

“How is this ? ” she said, with infinite disdain. “Wrangling over the neophyte ! Slaves ! what can he owe to you ? It is to me he must look for inspiration. I am the sublimity of the world.”

“You cannot be Cleopatra,” said the young man vaguely ; “and Helen was fair.”

“Ha ! ha ! ” chuckled Dandin, while a sound like suppressed mirth broke from the shroud.

“Peace, plebeians ! ” exclaimed the lady. “Cleopatra ! Helen ! Is this insult or degraded ignorance ? Know, ill-starred boy, that I am Like Cæsar’s Wife Above Suspicion ! ”

“I had a wife,” growled Dandin. “She was like all other women. *Vous l’avez voulu*——”

“Peasant knave, be still ! Like Cæsar’s Wife Above Suspicion is the guide of monarchs and statesmen ! ”

“That was Egeria—quite a different person,” murmured the Play of *Hamlet* with Hamlet Left Out.

SINGULAR BEHAVIOUR OF QUOTATIONS.

"I have been quoted in the House of Commons," continued the lady severely. "No panegyric of integrity is perfect without the grace of my presence. I am the supreme gift of Paganism to Christian ethics, and the incense of sermons rises in my honour. Reject me, young man, and your career can never know a moral glow."

"Reject you!" laughed Dandin. "He will have to take both of us."

"You are a most ill-bred man."

"That is what father-in-law said. *Vous l'avez voulu, George*——"

*Mr. Dick makes
a proposal.* Here there was another singular interruption. A gentleman with an amiable but vacant countenance, a pen behind his ear, a sheet of foolscap in his hand, and a bust under his arm, came breathlessly on the scene.

"Ah! I perceive I am just in time!" he said to the prisoner. "What are they going to do with you? Not put you to bed? You are not quite young enough for that. You know me, of course. I am Mr. Dick, and I can't keep King Charles's Head"—he patted the bust reflectively—"Out Of The Memorial. Would you mind looking over the document? Thank you. The Head is there as usual? I thought so." And he gazed around triumphantly. "I used to be distressed about the

A PATRON OF BARBERS.

Memorial," he went on ; "but it is so popular that I am quite proud of it. Nobody can write nowadays without mentioning my remarkable achievement. You will find me in all the books and journals ; and if they are really not going to put you to bed, or wash you, it might be a useful introduction for you to the literary world to hold the Head a moment while I add a few lines to the——"

A shout of laughter from George Dandin checked the discourse. At the same moment the grip of his knees relaxed, and by a sudden exertion the young man contrived to throw him head over heels on the sand. Then, breaking away from the group, the fugitive rushed into the sea and struck out in the direction of a buoy, which bore the inscription "Commercial Intelligence"; and to this, when last seen, he was still clinging in an exhausted state.

A PATRON OF BARBERS.

*Ruthlessness of
barbers.* MANY years ago, I emerged one afternoon from a barber's in the Strand with seven-and-sixpence worth of pomatum. I had gone in with the simple intent to have my hair cut ; the distressing tendency of my hair to

A PATRON OF BARBERS.

riotous extravagance has always been remarked by my friends. The barber—I can see him now—was a sort of incarnate spirit of Macassar ; his head was brushed and oiled to a perfection which shone disdainfully upon me in the mirror opposite. He went about his work with that cold and butcherly resolve I have often noticed in barbers as soon as they grip the shears. A philosopher would say, no doubt, that they have the defects of their qualities ; they would take all your hair off, and your head as well, if you did not restrain them with a challenging eye.

*A little skull
exercise.*

There was a swish of scissors, and in a twinkling I was almost blinded by a shower of hair, like falling leaves in autumn. “Head a little more this side—thank you—rather warm to-day—beg pardon—hair tickling your nose ?—I think you said shampoo ?” The next moment I was gazing into the subterranean passage of the basin (once declared by a medical journal to be one of the avenues of death) ; suds rushed into my eyes, and a scalding sensation, promptly changed to freezing, pursued the gallop of luxury. “Towel for the face,” said the voice from the pinnacle of superiority above me ; another towel and a pair of fists fought for the possession of my head. “Hard brush,” remarked the pinnacle ; my skull whirled

A PATRON OF BARBERS.

violently, like a dissolute piece of clockwork ; and then, gripping the chair by both arms, I beheld myself in the glass, a strange object with starting eyeballs, and the pinnacle aloft, unruffled and smiling.

Perhaps it was because I was so
"Nothing on ?" young that this plan of battle succeeded. Scissors, suds, hard brush—horse, foot, and artillery—had reduced me to gasping subjection. The pinnacle looked at me with a snakelike glitter in his eye. "What will you have on ?" "N-nothing," I panted. He frowned. "Nothing ? Gentlemen always have something on in this shop. You can't go out with your hair like a bundle of hay. A nice sort of advertisement that would be ! Do you want to bring discredit on our business ?" I weakly disclaimed any such design. "Then here's the very wash for your kind of hair." He spoke of my kind of hair as if it hurt his professional dignity. "It has been awfully neglected, but we'll do our best for you." He rubbed the horrid stuff into my head with an oily smack, and then proceeded to part my hair on one side. "In the middle," I murmured, faintly. Now, it so happened that, a few days before, I had reached that turning-point in a man's career, the parting of the ways, so to speak, where an inspiration—he knows

A PATRON OF BARBERS.

not whence—divides his locks, like the Red Sea on a historic occasion. (Mine, I had better state, were brown !)

*"Part my hair
in the middle."* I had stood before the glass one morning, seized by this great idea, but somewhat fearful of the world's opinion. In a certain stratum of society, there used to be, I regret to say, a prevalent belief that parting your hair in the middle is a symptom of foppery. That troubled me ; so did the reluctance of my hair to adapt itself to this new condition of enlightenment ; so did the discovery, when I visited a theatre in the evening, that "I part my hair in the middle" was the merriest line in a topical song in the successful burlesque of "Romulus and Remus." I had a morbid suspicion that the eye of the pit was upon me ; I felt more like Remus than Romulus—poor, mythical Remus, who was cut off so early ! And as I looked at the barber, I wondered whether the wolf, who was supposed to have suckled the legendary Roman twins, and who, doubtless, combed their hair of a morning, would have suppressed this parting in the middle as an intolerable affectation.

*Barbary sets the
fashions.* The barber paused, and played a disagreeable tune on the teeth of the comb with his thumb. "You'll want a deal of

A PATRON OF BARBERS.

hair-wash," he said, thoughtfully, "if you part your hair like that. It ain't natural, you see, to your kind of hair."—Again, *my* kind! "But I daresay you can manage it with a bottle or two of our fragrant and effervescent deterrent effulgent. You see, sir, your hair sticks up now, and the parting can't be seen, which is a pity. What you must do is to get the hair to lie down." He talked as if it were a too vivacious dog! "Some gentlemen wear their hair just a little up, and then we give them our pungent and tangent Barbarian Elixir. We call it after the King of Barbary, who was in the shop every day when he was last in town. No, the deterrent effulgent is the thing for you—quite free from grease. You'll have a lovely parting in a month; and now I look at you, I see that down the middle suits the counter of your brow." He may have meant contour; but I didn't venture to correct him. "Yes, we keep it in two sizes, twelve-and-six and seven-and-six. Small size? It won't go so far. Very well. Anything else in the shop? Thank you. Hair sixpence, shampoo sixpence, deterrent effulgent, fragrant and effervescing, seven-and-six — eight-and-sixpence — good - day." Then, as I have said, I emerged from that barber's with seven-and-sixpence worth of pomatum. In those days a half-sovereign dispensed a week's dinners to a lank youth who plodded every day in

A PATRON OF BARBERS.

Paternoster Row with orders for what a distant corner of the British Empire supposed to be literature. He could not dine off pomatum ; its effulgence might strike the eye, and its fragrance might entertain the nostril ; but it was sorry provender for a vacuum. Years later it was found cobwebbed on a shelf, as fragrant and deterrent as ever.

Decline of pomatum. Muses and Graces forbid that I should be thought to cast a slur on barbers as a class ! When I sit in a luxurious chair in the shop of Messrs. Parnassus and Peppermint, where I receive a liberal education in Court news and racing “fixtures,” I am never asked to spend my money on bottles, large or small size. Indeed, I often wonder who buys these marvellous preparations now, for our curled darlings are by no means so lavishly oiled as of yore. Adonis does not diffuse essences down Piccadilly ; nor do his seniors part their hair behind, as was once the fashion of elderly bucks. You still see that parting in certain low-comedy wigs, and it always suggests to me some oversight of Darwin’s, when he was tracing the descent of man. Among our arboreal ancestors, that parting at the back of the head may have been the stamp of aristocracy ; or it may have been devised by the male to give the irate female as

A PATRON OF BARBERS.

slight a hold as possible on his retreating figure. But, as I say, when I visit the premises of Parnassus and Peppermint, and gaze with impunity on the rows of phials, handsomely stoppered, and kept, no doubt, purely for decoration, and when a practised hand moves daintily over my *chevelure*, and a suave voice speaks to me of the pleasures and adventures of the fashionable world, I look back on those years of storm and stress, in which ten minutes with a barber were like hours of breathless hazard.

*The avenger
shaves "up"!*

I am not always sure, even now, that this repose is not a mere lull. Suppose one's implacable enemy were to take a place as assistant to Parnassus and Peppermint, and just at the moment when your head lies back, and your jugular vein is bared to the razor which is shaving "up," you were to see your imminent doom by a flash of recognition in the glass! I don't think this situation has been treated in fiction; but if anybody wants to tell a cheery tale in the family circle, let him describe (with embellishments) how, when this idea first struck me, I started so violently that Mr. Parnassus, an amiable old gentleman in spectacles, who sat at his desk reading an evening paper, ejaculated "Bless my soul!" as though he actually saw blood spurting over his unimpeachable towels!

A PATRON OF BARBERS.

*Bed the only
safe place.* This may be the wild imagining of a nervous temperament ; but I fancy it has something to do with the gruesome practice of shaving oneself. Life begins anew for me every day with the razor. My first dreamy sensation is that bed is the only fortress of the mind, from which opinion I am in nowise dislodged by the thought of a rapidly cooling breakfast in the adjoining room. Early rising has, I take it, been abolished by a mature civilisation ; but why does not some potent philosopher expose the evils of rising at all ? If nobody rose, where would be the complicated bothers of existence, the law's delay, and the rest of the mischiefs which Hamlet recited, without perceiving that bed is much better than sticking yourself with a bare bodkin ?

*Wits stimulated
by shaving.* Stirred from this engaging speculation by that enemy of peace, the watch, with its sleepless tick, and its smooth, mocking face, I shamble towards the bath. Even that does not rouse me from the blessed torpor which is one of Nature's richest endowments ; 'tis when I strop the razor that the actuality of a new day begins to steal through my veins. The first touch of the keen edge introduces the first idea, so surprising an advent that the razor turns inward, and the new-comer is christened at a small red font.

TO HEAVEN IN MY BOOTS.

If the ideas are numerous, I finish shaving, gashed like a German student, or a Montenegrin after some affray which eclipses Marathon and Thermopylæ. If there are no ideas, the vacancy of the morning is celebrated just the same by a crimson foam. Near the jugular there remains a tract of stubble which I dare not shave "up," lest a too brilliant idea, or a too vivid sense of barrenness, should abruptly end my career. You might be immaculately shaved by one of the young men of Mr. Parnassus ; but then there would be no glorious scars to remind you of the spiritual visitations with which, perhaps, you were braced for the daily round.

TO HEAVEN IN MY BOOTS.

*"On joint
account."* LOOKING over a sensible little hand-
book, "How to Become a Journalist,"

I am reminded of the days when that problem stared me out of countenance. They were days spent, for the most part, in a merchant's office—a commission merchant, I think he was called, though the commission was imperceptible. I remember entering commercial transactions in a ledger, relating chiefly to the amazing pertinacity

TO HEAVEN IN MY BOOTS.

of a firm in New York, who sent us consignments of tallow "on joint account." When the tallow was sold, there was no "joint" to speak of, nothing that could have appeased even the smallest appetite.

*Optimism of
tallow.*

The commission merchant seemed to make a precarious subsistence out of the charges, "storage," "portage," and the like, which, when deducted from the "joint account," left a shadow that eluded arithmetic. Yet the undaunted firm in New York went on sending tallow, and could not be persuaded that it was out of fashion, or under a cloud. I suppose it never occurred to them that tallow was no longer used for greasing boots in this country, that, in the general advance of civilisation, the wheels of railway carriages demanded the finest cosmetics, and that nobody dreamt of going to bed with a candle which was not of wax. Or it may be that the sending of tallow becomes a habit which cannot be broken without the total destruction of faith in terrestrial things.

*Fate with a
blue pencil.*

The ledger in which I chronicled the operations of the commercial Sisypus was one of a multitude in the city where, as Mr. Le Gallienne says, "busy, imaginative cotton-brokers, in the thronged and humming

TO HEAVEN IN MY BOOTS.

mornings, sell what they have never seen to a customer they will never see." Among the local journals was a weekly satirical print, conducted by a man of caustic individuality, whose flagellation of abuses had excited my enthusiasm. Before I made his acquaintance he had spent a certain time in prison for libel, and I was disappointed by the moderation of his views. My first article for his paper was a notice of a comic opera, and he drew a blue pencil through the best things, remarking that "Jimmy," a comedian to whom I had shown no favour, was in ill-health, and had a wife and family.

*Worms will
turn !*

Another visit to the theatre was followed by a dramatic incident. It was known in the house that a representative of the satirical journal was present, and, with the omniscient indiscretion of the unfledged critic, I discussed the performance audibly with a friend. Next morning a deputation from the company waited on the editor, and protested against the unfairness of the criticism they had not seen. He was ready for me with the blue pencil, which made a tour through the article, stopping at all the places of interest. When the paper appeared, the wags of the company I had offended issued a parody of my notice on a broadsheet, and I was painfully con-

TO HEAVEN IN MY BOOTS.

scious that the travesty was much more entertaining than the original. What would happen in the world of dramatic criticism if the victims of contumely were to make a point of turning on the tormentor with a surprising command of persiflage?

Juvenal and a glass of sherry. What happened in my case was that I took leave of the drama for a while, and launched my youthful ardour upon the local abuses. The editor suggested a series of articles on the drinking-bars which were frequented by the "busy, imaginative cotton-brokers," and reported to be nests of debauchery. Oh, the hours I spent in those bars, keeping up a feeble pretence of tippling, and waiting for the iniquity to begin! Barmaids wondered haughtily why I lingered over one glass of sherry and a biscuit, dumb and image-like, staring from a corner at the clerks, who, instead of plunging into wild excess, came and went unconscionably sober. Was it possible they had heard that the satirist was on their track? Did the dispirited youth who slowly sipped his sherry and mumbled his biscuit look like Juvenal? I might have said, "Another glass of sherry, please, and what time does the debauchery commence?"; but I was too dejected for this desperate expedient.

TO HEAVEN IN MY BOOTS.

*To heaven in
my boots !*

One thing seemed very plain ; misadventure was the beginning of journalism. The beginning, moreover, was apparently interminable. I left for a while the city of the drinking-bars, which veiled their infamy so obstinately, and found myself one evening in the room adjoining the Parliamentary Press Gallery. A letter of introduction brought out a little man, with a sharply interrogative eye, and hair standing up all over his head. “Do you write shorthand ?” he said, abruptly. I did not. “And you want to be a journalist !” he exclaimed. “You might as well expect to go to heaven in your boots !” I was too much taken aback for expostulation, though, had he waited a moment, I should have explained that the editor of the satirical weekly print had never mentioned shorthand. He had once suggested that a little Roman history was refreshing to English prose, and the rest of his instruction was given with the blue pencil. I tried a London editor with another letter of introduction, accompanied by a copy of tasteful verses. Never shall I forget the courtesy of that man. He had read the verses—for they were returned with a French word carefully corrected—and he hinted in his reply that, as he had lived eighteen years in France, a mastery of the French tongue had been, as it were, forced upon him. Who could fail to appreciate the

TO HEAVEN IN MY BOOTS.

delicacy which actually apologised for its superior knowledge?

*The shrine of
St. Vitus.*

But the shorthand! I remembered David Copperfield's experience, and shuddered. "A youth of average intelligence may master it in a year without a teacher," says the sensible little handbook now before me. He may have arbitrary signs burnt into his brain till, in a bilious delirium, he sees them curling in horrid arabesques on the wall-paper; he may feel them emerging from the tips of his fingers which wander over the table-cloth, as he listens to an after-dinner speech, while unfounded suspicions rise in the minds of the onlookers; he may never, sleeping or waking, rid himself of the terror that these detestable hieroglyphics are undecipherable. The handbook says there are shorthand writers who eternally take notes; they cannot hear a sentence without jotting it down; shorthand to them is intellect, bread and butter, the mainspring of the universe, and a sort of St. Vitus's dance. I believe the Recording Angel spent a year over Pitman, and now fills up the heavenly scrolls with all manner of tedious repetition.

*Sad end of a
pleasantry.*

But I could never face him in my boots if I did not master this handi-

TO HEAVEN IN MY BOOTS.

craft, and yield myself to this mystic disease. So a year of dreary nights was given to shorthand, while the days were passed in a colonial merchant's office, where I was supposed to be a journalist inditing letters of European interest to an imperfectly printed sheet in South Africa. Upon a stool in St. Mary Axe I detected the machinations of Bismarck, and urged Gladstone upon his revolutionary career. But here arose a new trouble. One of the difficulties in beginning journalism is that you are never sure of your atmosphere. The air I had breathed, when mewing my literary infancy, was the air of the weekly satirical print; and one day I made a pleasantry, quite in the manner of that journal, about an Illustrious Personage, who, for some mysterious reason, was dear to the colonial merchant. He did not take me to task merely; he took the task from me. When the sensible handbook I have been considering reaches its second edition, I hope to find it enriched by a serviceable chapter on atmospheres.

*Narrow escape
of H.R.H.*

It was now high time to appeal to St. Vitus. For six months my shorthand was put to the test of May Meetings, board meetings, public dinners, and the eloquence of coroners, for the benefit of a London daily paper, while the patron saint of reporters watched over me

TO HEAVEN IN MY BOOTS.

with convulsive solicitude. Ah, that first public dinner, when an Illustrious Personage meandered through the statistics of a charitable institution ! No disloyal joke was possible here, and yet something was wrong again with the atmosphere. When I returned to the office, the charitable statistics, embraced by the arbitrary signs, whirled derisively through my note-book. I do not reproach St. Vitus ; he did his best for a graceless neophyte ; but the awful fact was plain that my shorthand characters were as occult to me as a cuneiform inscription on an Egyptian tomb. I hope my report did not injure the charity, nor convey to the public a false impression of the Illustrious Personage's intelligence. His popularity, I believe, remained intact ; but my daily paper pined and withered. "The majority of coroners," says the handbook, "are kindly disposed towards journalists"; and this benevolence to me may have been due to a premonition, a professional scent, of my shorthand's approaching demise. At the end of six months I held an inquest on the stylus and the "flimsy," and St. Vitus, I have no doubt, shed symbolic tears ; but from that day to this, in moments of acute bodily pain, I trace the arbitrary signs in the air, as if they were masonic signals of propitiation to an invisible spirit of doom.

TO HEAVEN IN MY BOOTS.

*The Parliamen-
tary Olympus*

My boots have never been directed heavenward, though I have quitted the Press Gallery of the House of Commons, after many sessions of brooding over public affairs in a capacity which needed no protection from St. Vitus. I left the little man with his hair still upright, nearly white now, and bristling with distinction. I have left comrades there, who enlivened many a weary debate with whispered epigrams that would have been keenly relished by yawning legislators, and arguments that transcended the dialectics of statesmen. The Gallery is like Olympus, where the gods look down with impartial patronage on dull mortals, and correct their grammar. "Errors of grammar must be rectified," says the judicious handbook, "and slovenliness of style should be improved upon." This dictum discloses the true relations between Parliament and the Press. In Olympus the Recording Angels polish the slovenliness and rebuke the manners of the vociferous actors below.

It is a blessed comfort to know that there are agile Mercurys, shod with scorn, and keen-witted Apollos, robed in logic, still in the Gallery, translating Parliamentary English into our uncorrupted mother tongue. I bow my head to receive their sorrowful benediction, and wonder how I became a journalist after all.

ON A CERTAIN NOTABLE FIRE.

*The perpetual
sentry.*

I AM sitting at the club-window where I write of a morning, by virtue of a constitutional usage now so well recognised, that any of my friends who chance to saunter this way in the placid hour which leads to luncheon, nod affably to me as they pass, assured by my prescriptive presence that all is well. They regard me as an institution, an immutable dial, a sort of Greenwich time, or a perpetual sentry arching an eyebrow with a silent "Who goes there?" This is the more comforting to them because they know I am musing on the affairs of empires, while a printer's devil is ensconced somewhere in the hall, where I shall rouse him presently from the wizard spell of a much-thumbed tale.

*I appeal to the
rational elector.*

I have begun the morning's operations as usual by glancing through the journals which do not belong to my party. What a pitiable spectacle they present! Do they seriously suppose that this concerted attack on an eminent statesman can confuse the real issues in the mind of any rational elector? How easily that familiar sentence trips off the pen! How vivid to my eye are the features of that rational elector who

ON A CERTAIN NOTABLE FIRE.

sits opposite to me regularly on these occasions, with the ballot-box in one hand and my "leader" in the other, while he registers each period with an automatic nod ! . . . There goes Jones—he shakes his head mournfully. Poor fellow ! he has proposed to the widow for the sixth time. . . . Do they seriously suppose that on this great constitutional question the democracy is to be diverted by a mere side-wind ? Oh, those side-winds ! How they caress the cheek of my rational elector, and toy artfully with the few wisps of hair which a single-minded devotion to the welfare of his country has left to him ! Shall an unscrupulous faction trample on immortal principles ? . . . Here that visual corner which busies itself with the outer world flashes the image of Julia in a passing carriage, and I stagger the rational elector with the supreme question—"Did she smile or not ?"

*The hall-porter's
warning.*

To me at this moment enters the hall-porter, a man of inscrutable visage and incredible memory for messages, parcels, and the coming and going of members. Without the least emotion he murmurs in my ear, "Perhaps you would like to know, sir, that the club is on fire. I have just rung for the engines !" Then he goes, and I gaze after his retiring form with a vague sense of incredulity. There is no alarm in the

ON A CERTAIN NOTABLE FIRE.

rational elector's visage. He shakes the ballot-box as if he were soliciting contributions to some hospital for the incurable. Smith passes—the exquisite Smith—with an airy wave of the hand, which means, “Keep the Empire going, old man : I’m off to lunch at the Café Royal.” Fire ! Could it have been a spark from Julia’s eye ? Would she immolate me when, like the Roman sentinel in Pompeii, I stand at the post of Imperial duty ?

Brown is calm. This reminds me of my half-written article and the journals of the other side. Do they seriously suppose that, by inflammatory appeals to passion, they can kindle a blaze which will consume the best interests of the nation ? Ah, here is Brown, the stolid member who devours the *Times* every morning, advertisements and all. “Fire upstairs,” he says, sinking into the easiest chair : “flue in the library. Always warned the committee against the flues !” How ignoble ! How characteristic of the recklessness which inspires the other party ! Do they imagine for one moment that by igniting an insidious flue in an ancient Constitution they can effect a purpose which they dare not openly proclaim ? . . . What a transformation in the street ! A crowd seems to have sprung up from the macadam. The windows of the club opposite

ON A CERTAIN NOTABLE FIRE.

are thronged by people who might have paid handsomely for their seats, such is their eager expectancy. Obviously it is for me to dash their spirits by offering a spectacle of unruffled calm. I move my table nearer to the window, and flourish some sheets of foolscap ostentatiously. This attracts the attention of several spectators, who point me out to one another. Perhaps they think it is Nero scribbling while his club is burning. Do they seriously suppose that the fortitude of sound statesmanship is to be disturbed by the factious rabble seeking their own profit or entertainment?

*Roman valour
of firemen.* A hoarse roar announces the arrival of the engines. I am struck for the first time by the impressive proportions of the firemen. They recall pictures of the Romans who carried off the Sabine ladies. Can this bulk be the symbol of a life spent in the heroic rescue of opulent charms from the flames? Helmeted men of prodigious girth seize the hose, and bound up the club steps like antelopes. Ah, those sinister journals of the enemy! Do they not see that the havoc of an inflamed partisanship is extinguished by the cold douche of political common-sense? . . . I hear the sound of waters rushing through ceilings; and presently the doors of the room where I am sitting are flung wide, and dripping waiters rush in with

ON A CERTAIN NOTABLE FIRE.

tables and newspaper cases, snatched from the smoking-room, into which the flood from above is pouring. I call to mind the story of a club where heavy metal fell one day from a lamp in the hall, and a member to whom the missile was shown by the agitated steward remarked, "*I hope it wasn't wasted!*" If only the torrents now descending on harmless, necessary servants would anoint the heads of certain members, of whom I could furnish a comminatory list! . . .

Still it comes, the fugitive furniture, till I am surrounded by a perfect barricade. Do they flatter themselves, those politicians in the opposite ranks, that there is no man to hold the fort against their nefarious strategy? Hang out our foolscap on the outer wall! I can see that the clubmen over the way are beginning to look crushed by my stout resistance. A drenched marker says, in awestruck tones, that there are three inches of water on a billiard-table. The miserable tide of intrigue will rise no higher, and the conspirators who have sought to overwhelm us with the cataract of calumny will find themselves stranded in the shallows of a fatal exposure.

*Gallantry of the
printer's devil.* As I end my article with this decisive imprecation on the foe, I descry the huge firemen trooping out through the hall

ON A CERTAIN NOTABLE FIRE.

with the air of giants who have been called to take a hand in child's play. The victory is won, chiefly by my inflexible resolution ; but I bethink me suddenly of the printer's devil. He has plunged into the fray like the Minstrel Boy, and I find him on the staircase agape with excitement, and grimy with much fingering of the hose. He watches the departing firemen with admiration chastened by discontent, for if they had carried him out of a heap of blazing ruins the dream of his young life would have been achieved.

*Brown's neglected
wisdom.*

“Ten years ago,” says Brown, in the middle of the collation improvised in the card-room, “I warned the committee against the flues. What you want, I say, on a committee is a practical man. And what sort of men do you get? Lawyers—Q.C.'s! What do they know about flues?”

“Any books destroyed?” inquires a new-comer excitedly.

“Only your valuable work on the cattle-plague, dear boy.”

*Deepness of
German
Philosophy.*

“Did you hear vot I vos saying about ze vire?” says a distinguished light of the Germanic Confederation, which is strong in our club. “I vos saying that

THE NEW ZEALANDER COMES.

ze club vould from its ashes like ze vot-you-calls-zim rise."

"Waiter," observes a wag, "cold roast fowl for Mr. Strumbalberger."

But, strange to say, there is a general disinclination to recognise the fact that the club owes its salvation to my heroism. My comfort is the reflection that the statesmanlike article which I penned in this extraordinary stress has averted a national catastrophe.

THE NEW ZEALANDER COMES.

*The Man
of Prophecy.*

It was close upon the noon of a day in early spring when a small boat which had put off from a steamer lower down the river touched Paul's Wharf, and two young men sprang ashore. They were sufficiently alike to be easily recognised as brothers, of dusky complexion, which testified to a warmer sun than ours, with black hair glistening like caviare, and denoting to a fastidious eye the lavish unguents of a belated civilisation. The one who appeared to be the elder carried a camp-stool and a large sketch-book, and wore a somewhat abstracted look, as of a man destined to fulfil a prophecy.

THE NEW ZEALANDER COMES.

*"Where are
the ruins?"*

Usually at that hour Paul's Wharf is a busy place, but to-day it was still and deserted. When the two young men paused for a moment, and took a rapid survey of the scene, they saw no sign of life save upon the vessel they had left, and in the small boat which was leisurely rowed back to the steamer by a couple of sailors as dusky as the brothers, and as carefully anointed. Wharves and warehouses and bridges were equally mute. This inactivity seemed to be recent, for a newly-painted Pickford van was solaced by the companionship of a cartload of hay ; cranes were visible everywhere, with trucks full of grain suspended in mid-air ; and implements of industry, scattered in great profusion, looked as if they were still warm from the hands which had been suddenly withdrawn.

"Strange !" murmured the elder brother. "It is, and it is not, what was foretold. The people are gone, but where are the ruins ? "

*A strange
solitude.*

This perplexity increased when the pair found themselves in St. Paul's Churchyard. Not a living thing was to be seen, but the shops had an air of expectation almost human. Every article was in its wonted place ; windows spread their wares, and chairs stood in obsequious array, as if deferentially beckoning

THE NEW ZEALANDER COMES.

customers to counters. Though the silence was profound, the young men listened with strained ears, afraid that the tide of life, which had ebbed so mysteriously and so completely, would return in a sudden flood and overwhelm them.

*Dubious
attitude of
Queen Anne.* Opposite the statue of Queen Anne the elder stranger halted, and sat down on his camp-stool with the open sketch-book on his knee.

"Here," said he, flourishing a pencil rather nervously, "is the symbol of that great watchword of English literature which we studied at home. Is it safe, do you think, to say that London* is as dead as Queen Anne?"

"To be candid," replied the other, with an uneasy laugh, "isn't it nearer the mark to suggest that her Majesty is just as much alive as we are?"

*"Soup's a
shilling!"* They stared at the royal effigy apprehensively for a moment, and then turned dejectedly down Ludgate Hill. At an open door they stopped short and sniffed. Yes, it was impossible to mistake the odour of soup. That delectable liquid was brewing on the premises, though no genial visage, surmounted by a stainless white cap, beamed with welcome. Could it be that tradition, with invisible hand, was stirring the

THE NEW ZEALANDER COMES.

familiar pan, and that the memorable soup renewed itself at the accustomed hour like the sap in a tree? The strangers were hungry, and curiosity sharpened appetite. They entered the shop, invaded the *penetralia* of the kitchen, and presently sat over two smoking basins. Certainly the soup did not taste of necromancy; it had a flavour of honest beef, so honest, indeed, that when the meal was finished, and the brothers rose refreshed, they lingered shamefacedly, as if expecting tradition to exclaim, "Soup's a shilling!" Were they watched by invisible eyes? Was the air full of viewless witnesses ready to cry shame upon them if they departed without paying the bill? The young man with a camp-stool clapped a florin on the counter, and they sped hastily into Paternoster Row.

*The Literature
of Decay.*

Here the silence was, if possible, deeper because a speechless eloquence rose from endless piles of books, chiefly small volumes of poems, in which the brothers, being of a studious turn, were speedily immersed.

"What do you make of your bard?" asked the elder after a while.

"His muse seems to be fond of reclining under the churchyard yew. He warns his lady-love that she will be a parcel of dust some day, and wonders what posterity will think of her in that likeness."

THE NEW ZEALANDER COMES.

“How curious! My poet has the same cheerful inspiration. He reminds the world that its utmost perfection is like dead rose-leaves in a jar, exhaling the perfume of decay.”

“Let us try a novel.”

They read silently for some time, and then both dropped their books at the same moment.

“Well, this is a pleasing story of a woman who defies the——what is it called?——the infamous convention of marriage. She commits suicide, and dies a martyr for righteousness.”

“And this is about several women who were driven by the wicked usages of society to protest in sumptuous tea-gowns against the horrors of wedlock.”

“More jars of roses! Surely these people are really dead! And yet that immaculate soup!”

*Gog and Magog
invalided.*

More puzzled than ever, they took their way down Cheapside to the Guildhall, and were seized on the threshold by the mingled fumes of alcohol and eucalyptus oil. The huge figures of Gog and Magog lay tucked in two beds, and beside each of them was a gigantic bowl of punch.

“Surely this makes the mystery plain,” said the elder brother, gravely. “In their dire extremity the citizens of London were driven to nurse their

THE NEW ZEALANDER COMES.

gods, stricken, like themselves, with a mortal malady. You see, they offered a last despairing sacrifice of the drink of which these deities, judging from their noses, were immoderately fond. It was all of no avail. Yes, brother, this is indeed a city of the dead."

*The City
awakes.*

But, even as he spoke, there was a sudden commotion. The air was filled with the clangour of bells and the hum of many voices. Gog and Magog deliberately rose from their beds, drained the bowls of punch with a resounding smack of the lips, and then fell into that attitude of statuesque grace which has been the pride of generations. Into the hall rushed a joyous multitude, shouting and capering, headed by the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs in their robes of office. At the sight of the strangers, who stood astounded, there was an abrupt pause. Then they were surrounded, and plied with eager questions. The camp-stool was severely scrutinised, and the rough outline of Queen Anne in the sketch-book excited much wonder.

"Surely it is for us to ask an explanation," said the elder brother, as soon as he could make himself heard. "We arrived this morning, and found your city a desert."

"We have had our periodical visitation of

THE NEW ZEALANDER COMES.

influenza,” explained the City Solicitor. “This time it has been exceptionally severe, owing to the Report of the Royal Commission in favour of Unification.”

“Down with it!” shouted the crowd.

“But we all get well at the same time, and celebrate the general convalescence with a banquet. No doubt you are hungry too?”

“Thank you,” said the younger stranger, with some embarrassment. “We have eaten nothing but a little—hem!—soup, for we—er—couldn’t help——”

“Soup! My boy, there’ll be turtle galore presently. I think you said you came from——”

“New Zealand.”

“A British colony! And it is the City’s proudest boast that it has ever striven to unify the colonies and the mother country—no, not unify—detestable word!—I mean, to draw closer those bonds of affection which—hum!—don’t you know——? And on this happy day it is most fitting that you should be the City’s chief guests.”

*Imperial zeal
of the
Lord Mayor.*

In an incredibly short time the banquet was spread, and the strangers found themselves seated on either hand of the Lord Mayor at the head of the board. That illustrious dignitary proposed their health in

THE NEW ZEALANDER COMES.

a speech which had never been surpassed in the annals of civic oratory. He ended by declaring that they were all familiar with New Zealand—he did not mean in finance only—(laughter and cheers)—and that New Zealand knew them. They had no need to sing, “Tell me, Maori, how to woo thee !”

There was a wild shriek of applause, amidst which the brothers looked at one another as if seeking strength for a grave resolution. Then the elder rose and said—

“My Lord Mayor and gentlemen, duty compels me to make but a sorry return for your hospitality. I cannot congratulate you on having come to life again ; for I am the New Zealander appointed by prophecy to sketch the ruins of St. Paul’s, and you have disappointed me.”

In the general stupefaction the brothers slowly withdrew. As they reached the door one voice found contumelious utterance.

“Who stole the soup ?”

The New Zealanders cast a look of scornful rectitude on the company, and were seen no more.

THE NEW MAN.

*A suffering
despot.* IN an exquisitely appointed boudoir a young man of pallid aspect was stretched on luxurious cushions of a delicate mauve tint, with one emaciated hand limply holding a blue pencil, while the other wandered ever and anon in quest of a gold vinaigrette, which he applied to his diaphanous nostrils. He was writing with the aid of a blotting-pad, daintily perfumed and richly lacquered ; but the progress of composition was slow. Something harassed his mind, for a gem-like tear rolled now and then down his cheek, and he uttered broken exclamations in a very high-pitched voice.

“ My head . . . my poor head ! . . . Is it my head or my heart that is most affected ? . . . Alas, I cannot drive the chariot of the sun this morning. . . . This dreadful news I must impart to an expectant world drowns my soul in sorrow. . . . What a spectacle is duty tearing the heart-strings ! Who will liken the vulgar Spartan boy, with the fox eating his vitals, to the chronicler of fashion bidding a last adieu to the pride of his life ? ”

*The nursery-pin
goes out.* He took up a sheet of cream-laid note-paper, thickly embossed with a gold monogram, and read this fateful decree :

THE NEW MAN.

“The nursery-pin is not likely to be worn this winter with the red Norfolk scarf.” Then he rose with difficulty, drawing his quilted satin dressing-gown more closely round his feeble frame. Looking fixedly at himself in a Venetian mirror hanging on a tapestried wall, he removed the red scarf slowly from his neck, and held the jewelled nursery-pin for a moment with trembling fingers. Then from an *escritoire*, covered with *cloisonné* work, he drew a small drawer, in which reposed many emblems of bygone glories. There were rings of various kinds, studs and solitaires of different patterns, a bangle or two, several fantastic buttons, a collection of gold chains; and on the drawer, in letters formed by small brilliants of the purest water, shone the legend—“Not worn now.”

He gazed into the drawer, and the gem-like tears fell fast. Women, he thought, keep old letters and weep over them; locks of hair have been known to stir emotion in the stoniest bosom; but here, in this drawer, was his heart's blood, wrung from him by the inexorable destiny which prescribes our ornaments and the cut of our garments from year to year. The grim old hag with the shears, who severs the thread of our mortal tether, is not more obdurate.

Then, with a sigh which almost snapped some-

THE NEW MAN.

thing internal, he dropped the nursery pin into its splendid sarcophagus, and tottered back to the cushions and the cream-laid paper.

The decree desolates Pall Mall.

“What desolation,” he murmured, “this will spread through Pall Mall when my column of ‘Club Chatter’ is read to-morrow by sad young eyes! To think that with this blue pencil I make man happy with golden visions of fresh triumphs in haberdashery, or crush him with the thunderbolt which strikes death to his dearest fancy in scarf-pins! Emperors never knew such cares as mine! . . . Perhaps a little nap now will recruit my exhausted nerves.” He sniffed weakly at the vinaigrette, and slumbered.

A few moments later the door opened, and there entered as strapping a specimen of young womanhood as ever rejoiced the eye. She wore a bicycle costume, which set off admirably the muscular suppleness of her figure, and she wore, moreover, an air of decision as of one who bears the heritage of a ruling sex. When she beheld the sleeper on his cushions, she smiled; and the smile, which showed a fine set of vigorous teeth, was both pitying and caressing.

How woman took the reins of empire.

“Poor Bertie!” she said; “worn out by the fatigues of an oracle on fashions for men! And there was a

THE NEW MAN.

time, generations ago, when women looked after the fashions, and men made the laws! What a funny world it must have been! But history shows us, as I said in my election address last week, that as woman grew masculine, man became feminine, till, at a critical moment, our sex snatched the reins of the universe from the palsied hands which—well, which now write ‘Club Chatter’ with a blue pencil!”

*The Right Hon.
Augusta's trials.*

As she stooped to pick up the cream-laid ukase, which had fallen on the floor, the movement woke the sleeper. He regarded her with blinking eyes and an expression of extreme annoyance.

“Really, Augusta! I thought I requested you never to come into my boudoir when you had been smoking.”

“So sorry, old boy,” she said, cheerily. “Quite forgot I had smoked two of Lottie Silver’s strong Manillas. You see, Bertie, a Minister cannot manage her party as she manages her husband. She has to have long chats with the Chief Whip, and Lottie is the most inveterate smoker I know. There’s trouble ahead, moreover. Selina Tabbychere means mischief, and squalls are brewing below the gangway.”

“My dear Augusta,” said Bertie, peevishly,

THE NEW MAN.

“you know that, if possible, I hate politics more than tobacco. I don’t care how you misgovern the country as long as you keep me wholly uninformed on the subject. And just now I am very much unstrung. The nursery-pin is gone ! ”

“Dearest ! ” exclaimed Augusta with real concern ; “and I made you so nice and comfortable before I went out this morning. Is it pricking you ? ” She began to pat him on the chest. “Do you feel it anywhere, darling ? ”

“Upon my word, Augusta, you are most inconsiderate. I am not pinned together like a baby ! Your head is always running on your nasty elections and things, and you never think of the lovely nursery-pin I wore with my red Norfolk scarf.”

“Darling boy, how selfish of me ! Of course, I remember it quite well. And you have had to give it up because the fashion must change ! But you wore it only one season, and I have had this bicycle costume three years ! Well, men must have their caprices, and I am sure nobody looks so nice as my Bertie when he is well dressed.” And she kissed him fondly.

“But, Augusta, you don’t take sufficient interest in my ‘Club Chatter.’ The boys at the Receding Chins will be staggered when they learn that the nursery-pin has gone out. Algy

THE NEW MAN.

Mannikin gave fifty guineas for a new one only last week."

"But haven't you any consolation for Algy?"

"Oh, yes," replied Bertie, taking up the pad and the blue pencil. "Now, do sit still a moment, Augusta, and I'll tell you something really interesting. To begin with, there's a new and delicate shade of trousering coming in. And coloured waistcoats! Just think, Augusta! Faint blue and dark tan with a frock-coat! Isn't it sweet?"

"Yes, dear, yes," said his wife, abstractedly. "But I am a little worried about Tabbychere. She says she won't stand a Peeress-Premier, and I am thinking of taking a coronet."

"Augusta!" he cried, clapping his hands, "you have a brilliant idea at last! A coronet! It's a perfect inspiration!"

*A new use for
coronets.*

He grasped the blue pencil with unwonted vigour, and wrote rapidly, repeating the words aloud: "I am glad to say there is every prospect of coronets becoming fashionable this winter. They will be woven in silk of the most brilliant hues on the upper surface of the shirt-cuff."

"What do you say?" asked Augusta, rousing herself from a reverie. "Coronets on shirt-cuffs!"

THE NEW MAN.

You really don't propose to put this nonsense into your 'Club Chatter'!"

"Nonsense, Augusta! How can you?" he said, the gem-like tears trembling on his eyelashes.

*Man is kept in
his place.*

"Herbert, I allow you to write this twaddle just to occupy your time and keep you out of mischief. But I will not let you bring ridicule on me, and on the party. What would Tabbychere say? She would write a lampoon in her paper, with the refrain—

'I want to have a coronet, and wear it on my cuff.'

I should be laughed out of public life."

But Bertie was now weeping convulsively. "You are a hard-hearted woman," he sobbed; "and you d—don't l—love me."

"Don't be silly!" she said, patting him on the head. "Now come for a drive with me in the dog-cart, and I'll drop you at the Receding Chins."

"C-can't we do a little shopping f-first?"

"Ah, Bertie, Bertie, you will ruin me with finery! Never mind—come along, and I'll stand you a new hat, and as many gloves as you like."

"Dear Augusta!" he murmured, laying his head on her manly shoulder.

ON THE ART OF NOT GROWING OLD.

*Growing old
mere cussedness.* “WE should never grow old,” writes Mr. Andrew Lang in reproof of Mr. Gosse; “it is only a bad, lazy habit, bred of town life. While there are links, while there is Lord’s, while there are salmon in the streams, there is no sort of use in growing old.” I am afraid that some people, who think they hear the first fluttering of the sere, the yellow leaves, will be cast down by this saying. We cannot all tramp the links and thrash the stream; we are not all disposed to handle the bat, or draw fresh supplies of the elixir of youth from the spectacle of Eton and Harrow in breathless conflict on a hard wicket.

*Useful memories
of boyhood’s
prowess.* Personally, I cannot say that cricket was ever to me one of the stings of ambition. As a boy I was renowned for the possession of those useless members known as “butter fingers.” An easy “catch,” hovering over my head, was usually regarded by the entire field with a sort of contemptuous desperation. The inevitableness of my destiny was to miss it; and on one occasion when a very hard ball, full at my

ON THE ART OF NOT GROWING OLD.

chest, chanced to stick in the hands extended purely for protection, the unspeakable disgust of the batsman's face fairly cowed me in my unexpected glory. But it has been a boon in the after-years, for I never think of it without feeling younger. Then there is the day when I went rabbit-shooting—or, rather, accompanied the sportsmen to a field where the harvesters were at work, and the rabbits ran out of the corn to destruction. They were not a pleasant sight—those poor little quivering bloodstained lumps of brown fur. Possibly I did not enter into the sport with the glee of country lads to the manner born; at all events, my depression prompted one of the men to a new entertainment.

“Here, you mealy faced young Cockney! Have you ever fired a gun?”

I admitted that I had not. He expressed his entire disbelief in my capacity to hit his cap on a sheaf at twenty yards. I agreed, but was willing to try. The awful weapon was put into my trembling hands. I shut my eyes, and pulled the trigger.

“Blest if the young cub hasn't riddled it!” said the owner of the cap, in deep chagrin. My inevitableness was again at fault; but some of the rabbits of the morning's slaughter were avenged. When I recall this incident, I don't feel a day more than ten.

ON THE ART OF NOT GROWING OLD.

*The elixir
of tears.*

This faculty of reviving boyhood at will may be strongly recommended as a safeguard against age. Before you rise in the morning, spend half an hour in renewing yourself, so to speak, in the bud. Call back not simply your successes in that state—probably a very limited exercise of memory—but your mortifications, the early anguish of the birch, the first snub from beauty, the sorry figure you cut in that encounter with an urchin half your size, the ineffectual tears you shed in sundry predicaments. When those tears bubble up again, they make a perfect bath of youthful vigour. I immerse myself frequently in those distant sorrows, and emerge from them as fresh as from the morning tub. Little did I think, when other boys of more robust fibre taunted me with this girlish facility of woe, that I should bless it in after-life. Old Dumas has turned to account the cheerful legend of the aged necromancers who made themselves young again by bathing in the blood of virgins. I can assure the middle-aged that they need not resort to this inhuman process for the recovery of adolescent bloom. All they have to do is to pass part of that half-hour before getting up in vivid reminiscences of childhood's bitter moments.

*The balm of
early injustice.*

In this aspect, children crying in the night, children crying for the

ON THE ART OF NOT GROWING OLD.

light, with nothing but a cry, have a utility the poet never dreamt of. I remember one burst of grief caused by the mother of a companion. Jealous I think she must have been of that emotion which bedewed my apple cheek at a moment's notice, for her son was singularly hardened for his years. She came to the school one day, and told the master that I had insulted her family—heaven knows how ! At this inexplicable accusation I lifted up my voice and howled. Long afterwards she lived in my private Chamber of Horrors as the supreme incarnation of cruelty and vindictiveness, much worse than Bloody Mary, Lucrezia Borgia, and other historical ladies who occupied minor pedestals of infamy in that exhibition. But I am grateful to her now—during that half-hour in the morning—and when I look at myself in the glass, I perceive that I am only fourteen.

*Jokes preserve
youth.*

Another excellent device is to ponder (still in that half-hour) your most successful jokes. Not those you make now, which may not be highly esteemed by the fraternity of professional jesters, amongst whom, perhaps, your efforts in this line are rather small beer, but the first emanations of a superior mind. Groping in the strata of my personal development, I find a

ON THE ART OF NOT GROWING OLD.

pleasing fossil in the shape of a joke in the Latin tongue. It pops out of the dusty past like the skull of Yorick out of the grave. Gone from me, alack ! is all the Latinity I ever had ; but this recollection relates incompletely to a line in Virgil. I stood in class one morning, stumbling through the construction of that poet, when there came from the lower school a procession of offenders to receive their customary punishment from the headmaster. I can see them now—I even remember their names, and summon up the bucolic fatalism of their visages. Probably by this time they are prosperous farmers, graziers, and what not. I dare say each of them has a considerably larger stake in the country than I am ever likely to possess. I should not be surprised to hear that they sit in Parliament for agricultural constituencies. But in this early period of their lives they were doggedly incapable of conjugation and declension ; and every morning they filed before the seat of judgment, and stared fixedly at the refined bamboo which hung with careless grace upon the magisterial desk.

*Especially
Latin jokes.*

The headmaster sat back in his chair, and gazed at them with humorous resignation. There was no anger in his blue eyes—Celtic eyes, Mr. Grant Allen may be pleased to know—only a mock despair. What had he

ON THE ART OF NOT GROWING OLD.

done that fate—these four fates—should be thrust upon him daily in the middle of the “Æneid,” when his spirit was far from the refined bamboo, away on the plains of Troy, with grandsire Priam, and pious Æneas, and the two gentlemen who dance respectful attendance, like Rosencrantz and gentle Guildenstern, or, being united by a quaint conjunction, like the Siamese twins? It struck me that there was a line in the very passage we were construing, which echoed this plaint. “*Quid tantum*,” it began—I forget the rest—which I repeated in a stage whisper. Then rose six feet of impressive majesty, shaking with laughter, and declaimed this line to the astonished culprits. It saved them, though they never knew why. They do not think of it now, I warrant, amidst their beeves or cotton bales. It does not tickle them suddenly in the middle of the Cattle Show. But when I survey the glass again, I have cheated time out of twenty years.

*An artful
prescription.* This prescription is at fault, of course, if the ageing patient has no memories of boyhood, no fount of bygone tears, no early jokes in the classics. For such a case I should say, “Try curiosity; cultivate, if Nature will permit you, two grey hairs—just two; and, in the course of conversation, make a point of

ON THE ART OF NOT GROWING OLD.

putting on the hands of time by a good decade." If, for example, you are actually forty, you can begin a sentence, in a tone of chastened melancholy, thus: "When a man gets to fifty"; whereupon you will notice a start of surprise in your auditors, and a pleasing expression of incredulity in their speaking features. If you manage this stroke with skill, the response will be, "Oh, we know you can't be more than thirty-two"; and in a trice you are a young man, comparatively. Somebody has definitely knocked nearly ten years off your age, and you accept at once the verdict of public opinion.

*Potency of two
grey hairs.*

The effect may be enhanced by bringing the two grey hairs into play, if you have them; for you run your hand through your locks, and murmur pensively, "Yes, but grey hair is a sad tell-tale"; on which the company, especially ladies, always sympathetic in this affair, exclaim, "Grey hair! But you have none. It is beautifully brown," or black, as the case may be. This strategy is promising if you take care to sit in a good light. But, on the whole, curiosity is the safest specific. It is not dependent on intellect, which may fail any of us at the critical juncture, nor on the disarmament of uncomfortable shrewdness in others. You need no equipment

A DISINTERESTED REVIEWER.

save an insatiable interest in the world, and endless speculation about your fellows. When you feel this resource, even in the beaten track of labour, curiosity is born, a lusty infant, rocking whose cradle is more healthful than golf or salmon. And then the image in the glass never grows old.

A DISINTERESTED REVIEWER.

The millionaire reviewer. I HAD not met Montagu Simmons, except in the most casual way, for some years. My humble avocation as a scribe had long been eclipsed by his success in a profession the huge emoluments of which are notorious. He was a reviewer of minor verse. At the club remarkable stories were told of the sums paid him for a single article. He would never write, it was said, unless a cheque accompanied the books for review, and he would polish off a whole parcel in the half-hour before dinner. Of the endless anecdotes which garnished his career one always struck me as specially significant of the man. It was noticed that he never ate *hors d'œuvres*, a habit he explained at a dinner party by remarking that before leaving home he had made a hasty meal of those delicacies in the shape of certain poems, the author of which,

A DISINTERESTED REVIEWER.

who happened to be of the company, immediately turned green, and had to be carried out.

*Haughtiness
of a spanking
equipage.* I used to see Montagu in the Row, where he rarely recognised me ; and as he sat beside his wife, who always drove a spanking equipage, he seemed to my observant eye to be far from happy.

“Not a very cheerful object, our friend Simmons,” said Tommy Marsden, as we leaned on the railing together. Tommy does the sparkling gossip for the *Meridian*, and it is in his column that I am accustomed to find Mrs. Simmons’s carriage described as a spanking equipage three times a week. “Looks as if he sees things,” continued Tommy ; “you know what I mean—the jim-jams of the uneasy conscience. Shouldn’t be surprised to hear that the ghosts of minor poets tip him their murdered staves regularly about four a.m.”

Just at that moment he saw us, and, to my surprise, the horses were pulled up, and Mrs. Simmons affably acknowledged my salutation, while Montagu said, “Come and dine with me to-night at home.”

“My dear, you know we are going to ——.” From the rest of his wife’s hurried whisper I gathered the name of a stupendous personage in the social world.

A DISINTERESTED REVIEWER.

"I shall be alone," replied Montagu, grimly ; and the carriage rolled on.

"Might have asked *me*," said Tommy, of whom no notice had been taken. "Why, sir, the *Meridian* has made that man." Marsden is not vindictive ; but I believe Mrs. Simmons's equipage was exiled from his column for a full month.

*A queer
lête-à-lête.*

As I took my way to Emperor's Gate I had no anticipations of an agreeable evening. My host, indeed, received me in profound gloom, and was taciturn through the greater part of dinner. Then, having dismissed the servants with a gesture, he said, with a curiously unpleasant smile, "Find the claret good ? "

"Most excellent."

"Ha ! Blood !" he said, still smiling. "Rather a pretty design, eh ? " he added, as I examined the handle of a dessert knife with some embarrassment.

"Quaint piece of ivory," I hazarded.

"Ha ! Bones ! "

There was another silence, and as I looked at his haggard face I recalled Tommy Marsden's remark about the "jim-jams," and felt more uncomfortable.

"You must think me an unsociable enigma," he said at last. "But, to be frank, I did not ask you here to-night with any hospitable intent. I don't

A DISINTERESTED REVIEWER.

pretend to like you, and I have not sent my wife out to dinner simply for the sake of your beautiful eyes."

"That is candid," I laughed. At all events it sounded like sanity.

"Yes, and I have some more candour in store. You see I live in what the *Meridian* calls a 'splendid abode.' It is kept up by wholesale massacre. How goes the line?—

'At every breath a reputation dies.'

I wade through gore to luxury. The dinner you have just eaten—not a bad dinner, I hope—comes from the vitals of the minor bard. From his veins is drained the wine which I am glad to know you appreciate. Now, I have invited you to sit as an impartial tribunal and tell me what I am."

"Obviously, my dear Simmons, you are a highly successful critic."

*Is criticism
murder or
retribution?*

"Obviously, my dear tribunal, you are begging the question. It is my daily business to put certain of my fellow-creatures to a painful death. They bow their heads before me, and I snick them off. This place is a perfect shambles; it reeks of slaughter. Now, am I a literary homicide or a public executioner?"

A DISINTERESTED REVIEWER.

"But why insist on such an invidious distinction?"

"Invidious! If I am a public executioner, I rejoice in the office. The world of literature is infested by a criminal class, the class of superfluous books. They are all the more criminal because they appeal to us in the name of old associations, domestic ties, the bonds of friendship, a host of subterfuges to escape the just penalty of their illicit enterprise. Look at the poetry that comes masquerading in the grave-clothes of the illustrious dead—the ode that capers in the shroud of Shelley, or smirks at you in Wordsworth's shawl!"

"But I don't see how your theory of the superfluous book stands the practical commercial test. Some volumes, doomed by you, must escape the headsman."

"They do," said Montagu, gravely. "Have you never thought that it would be an excellent solution of an economic problem to make the Laureateship tenable for a year by the unemployed in turn, so that they might break verses instead of stones? But a book may be none the less superfluous because it has a sale, even in a large-paper edition—because it is taken out of the condemned cell, arrayed in purple and fine linen, and told that it recalls the majesty of Milton."

"Then I do not understand why, with this

A DISINTERESTED REVIEWER.

positive confidence in your own artistic standard, you need anybody to convince you that you are not a literary homicide.”

“My good fellow, there’s the rub. When I look at the severed heads I have a misgiving, not that I have cut off some budding Shakespeares, but that the implacable assertion of a critical judgment is, after all, inhuman. Why should not these little books have their day, and cease to be, like the summer flies? There is no obligation to read them, and if you have a severe taste in literature you can gratify it by leaving them uncut. Why should they not give as much pleasure and as many pence to their authors as are consistent with the semi-literate good-nature of the public? And if their merits are trumpeted beyond all reason, well, there will be no echoes a hundred years hence.”

“You forget that is the time fixed for your ‘howls of torment,’ which, according to one prophet, will be the ‘only clarions’ of your ‘fame.’”

“Then I hope some benevolent person will have the presence of mind to say that my ‘howls’ are ‘organs.’ But what is the judgment of the tribunal on my dilemma?”

*The court
gives
judgment.*

“Considering that most reviewers are incapable of discrimination, and that when they have it, they are still

A DISINTERESTED REVIEWER.

accused of bloodthirsty bias ; and considering, further, that the public execution of books is a dubious benefit to your contemporaries, and of no value to posterity, the opinion of the court is that, to avoid the imputation of homicidal mania and the questionable celebrity of a common executioner, you ought to retire from your profession and seek absolute peace of mind in some obscure but honest industry."

"Thank you," said Montagu, solemnly. Then we shook hands and parted.

The executioner retires. A month later I was amazed by this paragraph in the *Meridian* : "The world of letters has sustained a grievous loss. We learn that Mr. Montagu Simmons has sold his splendid abode at Emperor's Gate and the spanking equipage which has so often delighted us in the Row, and has retired to the Scilly Isles, where he proposes to devote himself exclusively to the cultivation of bulbs. A large portion of his property is to be applied to the endowment of a Bards' Orphanage. Who will succeed him in the blood-curdling duties of the *Weekly Scaffold*?"

The business is still carried on. Modest reticence prevents me from answering that question with boisterous directness.

THE OLD YEAR AND THE NEW.

*Why the New
Year is
welcomed.*

It says much for the imaginative faculty in man, that he sets such store on the arrival of the New Year. He welcomes it with bells, with fantastic customs touching the complexion of the first comer over the threshold after the clock has struck the last pulsation out of the year that is dead. The New Year might be the herald of sure fortune, of that stroke of luck which is habitually overdue. Indeed, there might never have been a New Year till now, losing the gloss of novelty so soon, and sinking into the decay of disappointed expectation long before its sum of moons is made up. This happy New Year which will be with us in a few hours, which comes crowned with the *largesse* of good wishes we scatter amongst our fellows—all prodigal optimists like ourselves—this New Year is unconscious of the stolid indifference, nay, the contumely, and even the execration with which many of us are about to dismiss his predecessor. He has yet to learn the ingratitude of man, the curses that we heap on promises unfulfilled, pledges of our own fond imagining, the bitter eagerness of multitudes yearning to compass his end, and their indecent exultation when the leaves begin to fall, and he has only a few more weeks to live.

THE OLD YEAR AND THE NEW.

*A well-preserved
Old Year.*

I was thus far with my exemplary meditations when I became aware of two strangers communing at the other end of the room. We were in the club library, usually a tenantless apartment, for the tastes of the members do not race breathlessly after literature. I was the more surprised by this particular incursion because I had never set eyes on either of the twain before. One was an elderly gentleman, of extremely spruce appearance, to which he evidently devoted an extravagant amount of his spare time. He had white hair, very carefully brushed on that part of the acclivity where it grew somewhat thin. There was a glossiness about his costume highly suggestive of foppery ; and he sat upright in his easy-chair, with an assurance of vigour which owed more, I suspected, to deliberate art than to the bounty of Nature. His companion, whom he regarded with a slightly quizzical air, was a youth without even a touch of down on a most ingenuous face. He blushed a good deal, and appeared to be in a position of some embarrassment.

“ I understand you perfectly,” said the old gentleman, in a slow, drawling tone ; “ though I must say you are a little impatient, and this visit is most unusual in our family.”

“ I know it is a sad breach of etiquette,” said the young man, hurriedly. “ It is very good of you to

THE OLD YEAR AND THE NEW.

see me at all. I had no right to expect it ; but I could not resist the temptation to—to——”

*He gives points
to his successor.*

“To interview me before stepping into my shoes,” suggested the other, contemplating his tight boots with complacency. “Well, I suppose it is natural. Curiosity in these days is the beginning and the end of wisdom. And, of course, you want to know what I am going to leave you. There—don’t look so shamefaced, my boy ! But, upon my word, you are a forward youngster ! Why, in law, you are not even an infant. Bless my soul, sir, you are not born—the bells haven’t rung you in ! ‘Ring out the false, ring in the true !’ That’s the pleasant way in which the poets speak of our family. I am the false and you are the true ; and yet you come here and ask me to teach you— to put you up to a thing or two ! What a satire on philosophy !” Here the old gentleman slapped his companion on the back, and seemed mightily pleased with himself.

“But, sir, to say you are ‘the false’ is a disgraceful libel,” said the young man, his face flushing with indignation.

“So it is, my boy, so it is. But, to let you into a secret, some of our progenitors were not altogether a credit to the stock. In a family as old as ours there must have been a few black sheep.

THE OLD YEAR AND THE NEW.

Now, I have the satisfaction of knowing that I am popular. Indeed, if our affairs were not managed on the hereditary principle, I believe the democracy would have elected me."

"And why should you go, sir?" asked the boy.
"You are splendidly hale."

"Hale! I should think so!" exclaimed the elder, rising quickly. The next moment he clapped his hand to his back, and fell into his chair with a groan. "Just a twinge of that confounded sciatica—it always catches me in this moist weather. What a climate! Only fit for frogs! . . . But, as I was saying, I pride myself on my popularity. Of course, I have enemies. What virtuous character has not? You can't have my age and responsibilities without incurring a little odium amongst the unthinking. Some people say I am the hardest Year they have known; others that they have seen more crime and discontent in my time than in any they can remember. Don't be surprised if they blame me for treasons and stratagems—when I am gone. You have no idea what pleasure the morbid will take in reciting the names of distinguished persons who have died in my twelve months of office."

"But will there be nothing else?" inquired his companion, in a tone of uneasiness.

"Oh, they'll give you a regular procession of

THE OLD YEAR AND THE NEW.

skeletons. That is part of the ceremony of your installation. I have not forgotten the bones that rattled in my honour when I began. But, my dear boy, you must not mind that. And, above all, beware of flattery. Now, I have no doubt whatever that I am the most popular Year of the whole Eighteen Hundred and Ninety-Five, but you will have sycophants who will tell you that till your approach they never knew what joy was. The way the world goes mad over a New Year is simply amazing to any rational mind."

"Did it go mad over you?"

"Well, well, as I have told you, I am an exceptional Year altogether. That is awkward for you, my boy; for when the world thinks of me, after a sufficient taste of your quality, it will make odious comparisons. But that's its little way. Don't let it dash your spirits or make you cynical."

The young man gazed at his senior for a moment, and then rose with a new look of confidence and determination.

A painful misunderstanding. "You selfish old fossil!" he said in a cold, clear voice. "I came here much ashamed of myself for intruding on your last hours. But I cherished the hope that even in your decrepitude—which you have signally failed to disguise—you would have a generous thought for your

THE OLD YEAR AND THE NEW.

successor, and a desire to cheer him in the duties which he must take from your palsied hands. Instead of that, what do I find? A mean attempt to poison my mind, to destroy my faith in humanity, while you exalt your own miserable reputation, which is already crumbling before the criticism——”

“How dare you!” cried the old gentleman. “Keep your ridiculous rhetoric for Hyde Park! There will be more than enough revolutionary rubbish there in your time, I dare swear. You are drunk with your own importance, sir! You have no respect for age. Ring out the knight, ring in the churl!”

*The peacemaker
intervenes.* “Really, gentlemen,” I said, “this is a most unseemly squabble. Permit me, as one who has the deepest respect for you both, and who happened to be pondering this very subject when your interesting conversation began, to play the part of peacemaker. Personally I consider you, revered sir, as excellent a Year as any of those with whom I have had the honour of acquaintance. But the impatient optimism of mankind is always looking for something better, and this excellent young man will be hailed with an acclamation of which I have no doubt he will prove himself wholly worthy. When you are both gone, we may be the poorer for the loss of some illusions,

A MARKED MAN.

and the irony which is the salt of life may have a keener savour. But other Years will bring new illusions, new comedy, new magic for the endless childhood of the world's imagination! The wand of fantasy is not buried on a mountain-top in Samoa, and romance will be as real to us hereafter as your presence——”

But here I perceived that the congregation had melted away.

A MARKED MAN.

*Oversight of the
Post Office.* WHENEVER the Post Office Blue Book appears I search it in vain for some allusion to the following correspondence. Extract from letter to the Secretary of the Post Office : “I am astonished to find that a communication addressed by me to the Chancellor of the Exchequer a month ago, and containing twenty pounds in conscience money for unpaid income-tax, has never reached him. It is lamentable that an act of self-devotion to the highest duties of citizenship should be irretrievably marred by the bungling of your department. I may never have that fit of conscience again.” Extract from Secretary's reply : “I am in receipt of your letter, and have directed all inquiries to be made.” Some weeks elapse, and

A MARKED MAN.

then the Post Office confesses that it has totally failed to trace the missing document ; whereupon I pen this scathing rebuke : " I have read your letter with pain and indignation. This is the encouragement you offer to struggling virtue. That delicate plant, watered by the tears with which I drew twenty pounds from my hard-earned savings, is withered and blackened by the arid breath of official incapacity. When you publish the annual record of your achievements, in which the Post Office is blazoned as a miracle of benevolence, guided by the penetrating intellect of a Sherlock Holmes, perhaps you will include the episode which has now come to an ignominious close." But, as I have said, I search the Blue Book in vain.

Now this inspires me with the dark
A wary official. suspicion that I am a marked man. There may be deeds done in the Post Office which would have brought a blush to the cheeks of the Council of Ten. A friend of mine who holds a mysterious appointment at St. Martin's-le-Grand, preserves a suspicious secrecy as to his proceedings between the hours of eleven and four. He will talk genially about the drama, French literature and what not, but let the most distant allusion be made to the Post Office, and in an instant he is

A MARKED MAN.

on his guard. A veil seems to fall over his candid eye ; his face assumes a sinister impassiveness, and he walks furtively like a miniature Fouché. What is the inscrutable terrorism which can turn the currents of this cheerful human soul awry ? Are there strong boxes in the vaults of the Post Office, to which he pays secret visits, wringing his hands, like Sir Edward Mortimer in the "Iron Chest," over the evil stains of blood-red tape ?

*Miserable
evasion.*

When I unfolded my wrongs to him, when I related how I had been robbed of the satisfaction of reading in the *Times* that the Chancellor of the Exchequer returns his thanks to "A. X. P." for the payment of arrears of income tax inadvertently overlooked, my Post Office friend smiled in a peculiarly ugly way. "Am I a marked man or not ?" I asked. "My good fellow," he said, "I don't carry a list of the condemned about me, and you needn't be afraid of finding yourself in a tumbril instead of your accustomed omnibus. How did you like Arthur Roberts in——" "I will not submit to these incessant evasions," I retorted, angrily. "Do they or do they not remember that postcard ?"

*The historic
postcard.*

This recalled the one decisive triumph of my life over official ineptitude. Years ago I wrote a postcard to a man in

A MARKED MAN.

the N.W. district of the metropolis, and inscribed those letters with fantastic embellishments. The authorities said this was an illegal communication on the address side of the card, and charged the receiver a penny. Then I sent to the Postmaster-General an epistle which, I have no doubt, survives in the archives of tyranny. I drew from ancient history, particularly of Babylon, examples of folly in high places, and showed how they paled before this colossal blunder. I told the Postmaster-General he was another Belshazzar, and that N.W. was the writing on the wall. Next day a special messenger was despatched to the N.W. district to refund the penny. The Post Office was beaten, but was it likely to forget or forgive its humiliation? "Do they, or do they not, remember that post-card?" I repeated. My official friend laughed unpleasantly, and turned on his heel. I leave it to any dispassionate person to say whether, in similar circumstances, he would not consider himself a marked man.

*Public spirit
of A. X. P.*

But I come now to the most damning evidence against an unscrupulous oligarchy which presents itself to the public in the guise of an earthly Providence. In my odd moments I dabble in literature; it is a pleasing distraction from the serious business of life,

A MARKED MAN.

which, in my case, is that of writing letters to the newspapers on great public questions. I have a bulky volume in which these compositions are pasted, and which I have bequeathed by will to the British Museum, where, ages after I have returned to dust, generations yet unborn will read A. X. P. on vaccination, bimetallism, and the social desert which divides "Mr." from "Esquire." Perhaps the ideas that are scattered through those letters in prodigal profusion may strike posterity as familiar because they have been filtered into the common stock of information through the medium of leading articles. I have educated many editors, and received no more substantial acknowledgment than the guarded tribute to "a correspondent who remarks in our columns this morning" something which furnishes the whole conception of the much-admired leader. Of this I do not complain. To be no more than "A Correspondent," or, at the utmost stretch of publicity, to be the mystic A. X. P., consorts with the natural modesty of my character. Besides, to pursue every petty scribbler who borrows your ideas for a livelihood would be, as Junius (an overrated letter-writer) once observed, "beneath the dignity of revenge."

*He unmasks the
Post Office.*

But to know that you are marked
by the vindictive hatred of a State

A MARKED MAN.

department, that you are dogged through life by an official system which recognises in you its most formidable foe, is an experience which runs like poison through your blood. It occurred to me one day to relate this destiny in the form of a romance, and with feverish energy I set to work upon a thrilling plot. An intrepid reformer had excited the greatest uneasiness at St. Martin's-le-Grand by his vigorous attacks on the administration; a secret conclave of officials was held at midnight to concert decisive action; and about three o'clock in the morning a diabolical plan was put into execution.

*In the dungeons
of St. Martin's-
le-Grand.*

As nearly as I can remember, the scene was thus described: "A pale moon shed an uncanny light on a newly-painted pillar-box at the corner of a lonely street, when a cadaverous figure in a shabby and tightly-buttoned frock-coat approached with a stealthy tread. In his hand was a letter in an oblong blue envelope, innocent enough to look at, but charged with more explosive matter than the deadliest dynamite. He hesitated a moment at the aperture of the box, surveying his letter with a cold smile. 'The Anarchist now would despise this,' he murmured to himself. 'Fool! Beneath the rule of men entirely great the pen is mightier than

A MARKED MAN.

the bomb.' Then his practised ear caught a foot-fall, and he hastily dropped the letter into the box, glancing suspiciously over his shoulder. 'Ah, the postman! But strange! Why this gigantic form? Why this enormous bag?' 'To carry traitors to their doom!' hissed a voice in his ear; and in an instant he was seized from behind by powerful hands, thrust into the sack, and carried off to the dungeons of St. Martin's-le-Grand." Here he is put to the torture, blistered on the head with molten wax, which, by a fiendish device, is then stamped with the official seal. I cannot recall all the details, for the story, which was sent to Mr. Stead, entered the jaws of the Post Office, and was seen no more.

When the Bastille falls. Extract from letter to the Secretary:—"I understand that, as usual, all your efforts have failed to trace my missing manuscript. The reason is plain: *you dare not let it be printed!* But one day the Post Office will come down like the Bastille, and your head will be carried on a pike by A. X. P.!"

IN PRAISE OF CIDER.

A great discovery. BY a singular coincidence somebody was prompted to write to the *Times* just when I had made a great discovery. To the clubman of moderate means there is no such harassing anxiety as his daily drink. You can pass through cycles of political storm with equanimity; but when you have reached the age at which a man becomes reticent as to the precise year of his birth, and finds a morbid attraction in the writings of those medical Edgar Allan Poes who spin fearsome yarns of the organic diseases born of sedentary pursuits, you are torn by conflicting speculations about wholesome liquors.

Horrors of the Club Wine List. Now, there is a volume in the club wherein one may read strange matters. It is as innocent of aspect as a whited sepulchre. You remember the story of the gentleman who was beguiled into a cellar on the pretence that he should taste the finest Amontillado, and who was shut up in a cage and left to—ugh! my flesh still creeps at the recollection. It creeps still more when I look at that volume, advertising itself to the unwary as the “Wine List.” Page after page holds memories quite as tragic as the quest for

IN PRAISE OF CIDER.

the imaginary sherry in Poe's tale. They beckon you to dungeons of anguish, where the demons of cheap claret and unconscionable burgundy lie in wait for the thirsty simpleton. He thinks, poor soul, that the spirit of economy hallows a rising scale of luxury, and that, after a few days of the humble pint at one-and-three, he may pass with a good conscience to nectar at one-and-nine. That fiendish juggle with the odd sixpence lures him on till he is a slave to the torments of the medicated grape.

A cheap poison. With a few raisins and a tincture distilled by the chemist, I could make a vintage as near akin to the vine as any of these economical juices. I had as lief drink senna as that potation with which the thrifty Jones is refreshing himself at the adjoining table, after his labours for truth in the courts of justice. He does not know yet that he is in the cage! Perhaps the horrid verity will strike him some day when he is dining with some Lucullus of his profession, and finds that wines of the rarest delicacy have no flavour for a palate ruined by the cheap decoctions of the club. I can hear him beg for mercy in hoarse accents, as the victim does in "The Cask of Amontillado"; and there will be no reply save a mocking clank as of empty bottles. So demo-

IN PRAISE OF CIDER.

ralising is this idea, that I am tempted to bid my worst enemy to dinner with some specious show of friendliness, and ply him with the club claret at ninepence. That were a mediæval revenge to turn a Borgia green with envy.

*Cider as
salvation.* But what is the great discovery which I share with the correspondent of the *Times*! He prays his countrymen to drink cider in order to revive a drooping agriculture. He is not unmindful that Herefordshire is a cider county, and that he is a Herefordshire man. He fought an election on cider, corrected the mis-statements of his opponent on cider, and was seduced from this beverage only twice—by a glass of champagne in one house, and two glasses of irresistible port in another. Other counties rank below Herefordshire—Devon, for instance, whose cider is pretty well known, being extolled for its perry. It is only in a Herefordshire churchyard that he has observed the longevity of the natives, which he attributes to apple-brew. But with no constituency save a clear conscience, and no industry to advertise except this present writing, I wish to state that it was as a fugitive from the “Wine List” I came under the spell of cider.

*As a medium
of clairvoyance.* Breathless one afternoon with escape from fluids which savoured of apothecary

IN PRAISE OF CIDER.

caries in solution, or of cursed hemlock in a vial, I called faintly, with a sort of tentative despair, for some juice of Devon. Not being a Herefordshire man, I had no preference for one county above another. It was with no thought of agriculture smiling at last with triumphant disdain upon foreign competition that I watched the rich amber stream foaming into a long glass with a large lump of ice at the bottom. I drank, and in an instant joy was signalled through my system. I felt that the demoniacal vapours thronging after me from sham Bordeaux were routed by the sun of righteousness, that a marvellous keenness was imparted to perception, so that I looked round upon the company in the coffee-room, in various stages of servitude to befogging tippie, and saw their weaknesses spread before me in exact perspective. There is something in the clarity of cider, in the fillip of its subtle acidity, which contributes to impartial witness.

Its perils. But the slightest cloud in its depths destroys its magic, and there is peril if you drink more than a pint at one time. Nor does it harmonise with all confections—red currant tart, for example, which disturbs that fine equilibrium of sobriety and impulse which is the great virtue of this orchard ambrosia. You may safely

IN PRAISE OF CIDER.

drink a pint bottle at luncheon, and for dinner a pint of cider-cup is a pleasing variation. Here is no seduction to excess, and yet you have all the thrill of life sought by those youths in white waist-coats who have been bemusing themselves with liqueurs. Drink may have its affinities with the orders of merit ; and if brandy is for heroes, cider is for philosophers and reviewers.

But is it for teetotallers? I fear
Its virtue as a
"temperance" they may be suspicious of conspiracy
drink. against the strange liquids which are
classed as "temperance drinks." Some chemical derangement is always striving to exorcise the spirit of alcohol, while saying the thing which is not by calling itself ale. There is something pathetic in such devices to cheat the taste of the backslider, to keep the promise to the eye and break it to the sinful hope. A wise abstainer of my acquaintance has trained himself to drink nothing at all ; but the average man is not so strong, and he suspects that the non-alcoholic inventions which are multiplied every year could not have been honestly commended to Timothy for his stomach's sake. Moreover, Nature is a whimsical elf, and persists in putting alcohol even into the most respectable preparations of ginger. Shakespeare knew everything, for when Sir Toby said

IN PRAISE OF CIDER.

that ginger shall be hot “i’ the mouth,” he was predicting the trials of the conscientious teetotaller.

Its percentage of alcohol. Now, I will not hazard any calculation as to the percentage of alcohol in cider. It is there, no doubt; it is everywhere. It is like the humour which is prosecuted by ultra-Sabbatarians for bubbling up in Sunday lectures. We have all heard of the excellent lady who boasted that wines and spirits had not been seen on her table for twenty years, but could not understand why her guests were so partial to her preserved cherries. You cannot keep alcohol out of even the temperance memorial. But why not utilise it when it is chastened and subdued, when it comes to you with the delicious flavour of the best English fruit—American cider, I must warn you, is abominable—when you feel the sap of the orchard rioting in your blood—stay, that suggests the charge-sheet and the “beak,” and may alarm the timid—not rioting, but circulating with a homely and healthful rhythm, when the fragrance of apple blossom is ever in your nostrils, and the rich slopes of Devon (admirers of other counties can change the name at pleasure) are in your mind’s eye?

Its low breeding. There remains one objection which has probably excluded cider from many

AN OLD SCHOOLMASTER.

households. It is plebeian ; it is drunk by harvesters out of cans. But to confuse the cider of the farm labourer with that in which the ice made melody in my glass anon is as sane as to confound Bass with "four ale." Plebeian, forsooth ! There is one simple remedy for this prejudice, an expedient which has been tried with great success in some familiar patronymics. Spell it with a "y," Sammy !

AN OLD SCHOOLMASTER.

*A ruler of
urchins.*

THE last time I saw him he was striding down the street with all the dignity of the Established Church, and in a costume not uncongenial to that institution. About sixty-five years of age, tall and well built, with iron-grey hair and a kindling eye, he looked, in his black coat, white stock, and gaiters, like an Episcopalian dignitary of high rank and mellow prestige. He was, in fact, a layman, a schoolmaster, of a type which has almost disappeared ; quite destitute of learning, wholly competent to overawe the most unruly urchin, and very imposing in the eyes of the simple-minded class of parents who, in the days before education, were wont to send their boys to boarding-school with-

AN OLD SCHOOLMASTER.

out any inquiry into the system of teaching. We were not ill-fed, and the situation of the school, overlooking a river in a northern county not a dozen miles from a cathedral city, was not unhealthy ; but I do not remember that from this stately old gentleman with the sparkling glance, any boy ever received any educational suggestion whatsoever.

*His noble
penmanship.* He had, indeed, one accomplishment which he was never weary of displaying to our speechless admiration. He wrote a beautiful hand, of the copper-plate order : the hand which regales the eye in the windows of small stationers' shops at the seaside with information about desirable lodgings ; the hand which is not in other respects of any particular service to the universe. But it was the old schoolmaster's delight to sit at his desk of an afternoon, surrounded by a reverential crowd, and execute flourishes in fantastic circles about his own name on a sheet of paper, while we followed the comet-like course of the pen with envy and despair. To write like that seemed the highest achievement of human ambition. On the day when we wrote home informing our parents and guardians, in official diction, that we were enjoying the pleasures of a studious life, together with the joys of a united

AN OLD SCHOOLMASTER.

and carefully shepherded family, our preceptor walked from desk to desk, encouraging, reprimanding, waving his pen like a marshal's batôn, and spurring us to unheard-of zeal for the delicacies of a laboriously rounded text. In my time there was a legend that one prodigy of a penman in a short jacket had been decorated with sixpence for the writing of his despatch to the parental headquarters on the progress of the campaign in the strange and almost inaccessible country inhabited by commas and semicolons. When he returned home flushed with this honour, he was probably surprised to find that the document was not framed and glazed, and hung in the town-hall.

*He loves
a song.*

Before supper there was a ceremony known as the night-lesson, dimly lighted by oil-lamps. We consumed our paraffin in silence, brooding sleepily over primers, the darkness of a Dunciad pressing heavily on our spirits; when, suddenly, the old schoolmaster would feel a craving for festivity, and even song. I recall an evening when he startled us by asking whether any boy knew a ballad. There was an uneasy shuffling of feet, followed by sheepish communing in whispers, but nobody volunteered. Then we were invited to nominate a candidate for this new and rather alarming celebrity; and so a hapless

AN OLD SCHOOLMASTER.

youngster was presently extracted from the gloom of a remote corner, and planted near the master's desk in lonely eminence.

*Pathos of a
ballad singer.* He was a forlorn object, with red hair and a drooping jaw, and when he began in quavering accents—

“ I'm a broken-hearted milkman,
In grief I'm arrayed,”

getting up the last syllable with a guttural croak, the dramatic fitness of the sentiment provoked a burst of sympathy. He looked indignantly around, and proceeded—

“ Through keeping the company
Of a young servant-maid,
Who lives on board-wages,
A house to keep clean,
In a gentleman's family
Near Paddington Green.”

Here there was a pause, and the old schoolmaster, who had vigorously nodded approval, said “ Bravo ! Any more ? ”

“ Please, sir, there's a chorus,” said the red hair, in an injured tone ; and so we all sang in different keys—

“ Oh—she—was—as beautiful as a butterfly,
And as proud as a queen,
Was pretty little Polly Perkins
Of Paddington Green ! ”

AN OLD SCHOOLMASTER.

“Capital!” said the old gentleman, who had never before heard this touching ditty, which, indeed, was just then spreading a sentimental wail over England, tuning all the lackadaisical trebles in the rising generation of a day before Tosti.

Then the singer began again, with a strain of reproachful tenderness—

“ When I asked her to marry me,
She said, ‘ Oh, what stuff ! ’ ”

This was too much for the schoolmaster’s gravity, and he burst into a roar of laughter which was echoed by the servile audience.

“ What stuff, eh ? ” he cried, pinching the boy’s ear. “ So I should think ! Wait till you can write a letter without blots, and then see what she will say ! ” And, crushed by this stroke of satire, the red hair relapsed into its gloomy corner, and we returned to our paraffin with a vaguely discontented sense of having dropped to dull earth from the higher regions of pantomime.

*Treacle-
pudding
is filthy.*

The domestic economy of the school had a simplicity worthy of the presiding genius. The food was plentiful, but there was much soreness over the fitful second-helps of treacle-pudding on Fridays. This department was administered by the school-

AN OLD SCHOOLMASTER.

master's wife, a lady of florid aspect, whose love of thrift hovered over the pudding like the shadow of an interdict. Before breakfast and tea it was customary for one of the boys to be called in to assist in the allotment of plates of bread-and-butter. There was always a keen competition for this office, as it afforded opportunities of adjusting the largest pieces. Two crumby slices and a crust formed the portion, and I wonder now why the crusts were so keenly relished, and why the discovery of the biggest on the plate of the boy who had helped in the serving exposed him to subsequent kicks and cuffs. Oh ! the temptation of that crust ! I remember how I fought against it, and how I yielded, and had the precious hunch in my hand, conveying it from its rightful owner, when a shadow fell on the table, and at the window I saw, clinging to the sill at the risk of his neck, the bully of the school, watching my iniquity with threatening eye !

*A young
Shylock.*

The demon of usury haunted those crusts. Little Shylocks lent their portions at heavy interests, and there would come a morning when the speculator would collect the debts, and sit with a plate in front of him piled as high as the crown of his head, while his neighbours glared hungrily at the mountain he could not eat.

AN OLD SCHOOLMASTER.

A pound of flesh was not more gratifying to the Venetian Jew than the adjacent starvation to this commercial imp. The strife of elemental passions was greater still when a hamper came, and the lucky boy who had the jam at breakfast—three or four pots of it standing before him in a row—saw a wave of crockery rise from the table and tremble over him in the shape of petitioning plates, while his ear was split by the clamour of “Me, please !” As long as the jam lasted, that boy had a surfeit of power. What appeals to sacred memories—what promises of everlasting gratitude—what cozening and cajolery stormed and pleaded round those jam-pots ! I recollect how the florid matron declared that she had never witnessed such a demoralising scene ; and it was probably her stern sense of probity which accounted for the rapid disappearance of the home-made cake, to receive my lawful slice of which I used to slip out of the class-room every morning.

*The virtue
of hampers.*

Well, those were the days when a roll, bought in the village and cut in two, with a thick layer of sugar down the middle, was a dainty to be consumed in silent ecstasy ; and no access of fortune in later life has ever inspired the sensation with which I looked out of a window and heard the whole school cheering the gigantic

A WATER BABY.

hamper for the very small boy who had thought himself a moment before in the lowest deep of ignominy and neglect.

*Athletic
tradition.*

The old schoolmaster had two sons—the one a thoughtful young man, silent and reserved, who took long walks by himself; the other, athletic and boisterous, who presided over fights and games, and whose favourite speech was, “I can run any man in England, and my brother can walk any man.” We believed it thoroughly, and regarded such prowess as vastly superior to the scholastic attainments of the brothers—which, to be sure, were inconsiderable. Their father has long been gathered to a sphere in which flashing curves of penmanship have no share of immortality; and if his sons survive, I hope their old age is green, and that Fate has dealt as kindly with them as this chronicle.

A WATER BABY.

*A popular
fallacy.*

THERE is a common error that by quitting town, and betaking yourself to the upper reaches of the Thames, you can escape the din of controversy, and feel no more

A WATER BABY.

interest in the social question than the bovine models of Sidney Cooper which gaze placidly at you from the bank. The fallacy is that, far from the aggregation of men who excite clamour and acidulate the simplicity of life, you can attune your tempestuous soul to the restful beauties of the scene, and liken the stores of your mind to the stream, which, though gentle, is never dull, and is strong without rage, without o'erflowing full. Recumbent in a punt, remote from the turgid energy of the steam-launch and the mirth of crowds breaking into song after copious refreshment from hampers, with no music save bird-calls and the casual splash of the adventurous rat, with infinite content (miscalled laziness by the pedantic) inhabiting your bosom, while your mighty intellect toys with the fancy that poetry, distilled from the flowers, is sprinkled over you like fertilising pollen by industrious and commercially-minded insects, how can you expect to be assailed by the outcry of violated property, the slogan of vested interests, and other echoes of the endless turmoil of cities from which you are a fugitive?

*Apparent
irrelevance
of Bickerdyke.*

In good sooth, I can testify this is
no fantasy of an over-stimulated brain.
Before leaving town I had picked up

A WATER BABY.

a little volume, attracted partly by its cool green cover, and partly by the title, which lent itself to the associations of the river. Lying in the punt, I remembered this book, and turned its pages with the civil, but not over-cordial, salutation that you give to the printed word when your senses are in the mood to solicit fresh air rather than fresh ideas. My small green companion was called "Thames Rights and Thames Wrongs," by John Bickerdyke, a nomination which vaguely suggested legends of rightful heirs changed at nurse, and spirited away by corrupt watermen at the instigation of designing uncles.

*A terrible
indictment.*

The first blow to this romance was a citation of the London County Council ; then came an indictment of the Thames Conservancy Board, on which the metropolitan millions have only three representatives. Then justice was done upon the riparian owners who, as an organised body, stole backwaters, disputed public fishery, and played general havoc with the rights of man. The social question descended upon me with crushing force. Here were men levying war on the people, asserting private property in a public highway, affronting the eye by erecting hideous iron structures and calling them weirs, outraging the moral sense by treating the picnic as a

A WATER BABY.

criminal trespass, thwarting the wholesome hereditary impulse of the islander to swim in his natural element. What were the guardians of our liberties about in the midst of this invasion? Salaried Conservators connived at wrongs which might have put a mediæval baron to the blush. Front de Bœuf himself was not more callous to the sufferings of his Saxon churls than these riparian conspirators to the claims of the poor Londoner, ousted from his loveliest heritage.

I closed my eyes with the horrid conviction that the landscape had suddenly lost its charm, that the light had gone out of wood and meadow and turned to the dull drab of a London street, that the bird-calls had changed into the cheers and laughter of a noisy public meeting, that the whole atmosphere reeked of sordid conflict and vulgar contumely.

*The riparian
Ogre.*

When I looked out on the world again, it was darkened by a man, standing on the bank above my head, eyeing me with grim intentness. He was robust and square-jawed, had his upper lip shaven, and thick reddish hair under his chin—always an offensive suggestion to me of the origin of species. He wore that particular kind of massive felt hat which obtrusively advertises itself as the capital on a pillar of

A WATER BABY.

society. I knew him at once; he was the Riparian Ogre!

"Fee faw fum!" I said pleasantly, by way of greeting.

"Don't you know you mustn't moor your punt against my land?" he asked.

"I have just read it in Bickerdyke," I replied. "He quotes a notice; perhaps it's yours—'No boat is allowed to moor or *lay* alongside either bank of this backwater.' 'Or *lay*!' is good, don't you think? It reminds me of an alderman and the gondolas. 'Why not get a pair,' he said, 'and let 'em stock the lake?' Are you an alderman of these parts?"

"I am a Conservator," he growled.

"I see—Excuse my referring to Bickerdyke again: 'Three thousand pounds personality or property worth a hundred a year.' That does you injustice, I am sure."

"This is all my land," he said, with a gesture which might have indicated half the county, "and you've been trespassing on it. I can see the marks of your feet. You've been picnicking, too!" he added, picking up a paper bag, and staring solemnly into it. "This has had buns!"

I deny buns. "I plead guilty to the trespass, potent sir; it was to get a fairer

A WATER BABY.

view of your noble domain. But if you knew me, you would not suspect me of buns."

"What I say is," he rejoined, with much deliberation, "there you are, and here's a paper bag. That's good enough evidence for the bench. Perhaps you don't know I am a magistrate?"

"I believe it without hesitation. I have read of you somewhere—in *Truth*, most likely. But what portends your exalted office to me?"

"Two criminal offences—trespassing and pic-nicking—forty shillings each."

"Worshipful being, forbear!"

"And here's another; you've been picking flowers." He pointed to a water-lily in my buttonhole.

"What! punish me for taking just one white queen from the legion who are sitting there, each on her green throne, modestly closing if you look at her too hardily! Conservator, I plucked this flower with trembling fingers; a foreboding of some disaster for such presumption seized me, and now I see that you, a J.P., are a minister of wrath sent by the queenly lilies to avenge the abduction of their sister. You are a stern man; they have chosen their executioner well; but, tell me, have you never felt the temptation to which I yielded, or are you as passionless as that water-fly spreading his wings over the purest virgin of the snowy

A WATER BABY.

company ? Speak, Conservator ! To know that you, too, have been assailed by the yearning to which I succumbed, though, by the virtue which is innate in J.P.'s, you resisted the sorcery, will give my spirit balm ! ”

*The miller is
not floral.*

“ I don’t know what you are talking about,” he answered, gruffly. “ I don’t take much stock of flowers. I own a mill.”

“ Not on thy flowers, but on thy flour, J.P., thou stakest thy riparian soul ! But there are millers in minstrelsy. Saith not the song—

‘ Such mill-wheels turn not round,’

meaning yours, no doubt ? And there is a folklore ballad about a miller :—

‘ Sandy he belongs to the mill,
The mill belongs to Sandy still ;
Sandy he belongs to the mill,
The mill belongs to Sandy.’

You look that sort of a man ; you have that air of concentrated acquisitiveness, dogged, faithful, and adhesive.”

*I am charged
with public
bathing.*

“ Look here,” said the miller, “ I’ll tell you what it is—you’ve been bathing ! Your hair is quite wet. Public bathing in this back-water is forbidden ;

A WATER BABY.

it's dangerous, and this is a private bathing-place."

"Oh, exquisite J.P. ! Another criminal offence I suppose ? "

"Yes, that makes four. A pretty lot of convictions there will be to your credit when next you come before the bench ! "

"You are right. I feel steeped in turpitude. The only wonder is that I have not fished——"

"No public fishing is allowed here."

"——or joined the Thames Public Rights Association, and demanded a special rate on millers for the great advantage they at present obtain gratuitously from the river. That's what the fire-brand Bickerdyke says."

"Oh, does he ! " said the miller, in a great rage. "Then the likes of you oughtn't to be at large." And it seemed to me that he jumped into the punt, but . . . Well, just then I awoke, and found that the pernicious Bickerdyke had slipped off my chest, and that the caressing perfume from my captive water-lily was the daintiest joy in the world.

A COMEDY OF SIGNPOSTS.

*Ferdinand
is bored.*

FERDINAND was a little bored. There had been some excitement in watching the petrification of the villagers at the apparition of Miranda's knickerbockers on a bicycle. Small boys gaped, and old women stood rooted to the spot ; but as Ferdinand was on foot, the amusement of seeing the population turn to stone, as Miranda passed out of sight, was rather fleeting. Moreover, the morning was hot, and to toil after a bicycle on a dusty road, where the shade is infrequent, is scarcely an exhilarating exercise.

*Miranda as
a cyclist.*

Turning a corner, Ferdinand found the bicycle reposing in a ditch, and Miranda seated on the ground, ruefully rubbing a shapely shin.

"Ah, another spill !" he observed, tranquilly wiping his brow.

"Nice and sympathetic you are !" she replied.

"I thought that was your usual way of getting off !"

"Well, pull the bicycle out of the ditch," said Miranda, cheerfully. "I must have some more practice in mounting. You don't know how difficult it is, and you make me quite nervous."

A COMEDY OF SIGNPOSTS.

“Why, I am lost in admiration!”

“Pooh! And this is such a silly, flat road. There’s no nice lumpy place at the side to stand on when you want to mount your bicycle.”

“Pity I didn’t bring a cane-bottomed chair! I might cheer my solitude by singing ‘Chairs to mend,’ while you are careering away for miles.”

“Ferdinand,” said she, looking at him thoughtfully, “I believe you are bored.”

“Not bored, my child, only a lonely pilgrim. ‘No rest but the grave for the pilgrim of——’”

“Nonsense! You are tired of seeing me tumble about with this wretched bicycle. I’ll tell you what we’ll do. Let us get a chaise, or a dogcart, or something, and I’ll drive you round the country.”

“Hum! I don’t remember that driving is amongst your varied accomplishments. Won’t it be rather like mounting your——?”

“Don’t be tiresome. You know I can drive a pony quite well.”

*Miranda as a
pony-tamer.*

Here Miranda went off into anecdotes of her prowess with ponies; how she had made the most refractory quail at the sound of her voice; how she had trained one almost to perfection, when a wretched jobmaster who let the animal out for hire refused to allow her to complete his education.

A COMEDY OF SIGNPOSTS.

"I remember," laughed Ferdinand. "What was the owner's classic comment? Oh, he said you'd brought the pony home all in a sweat. And you did get him up those hills! Poor brute! I appealed to you with tears in my eyes."

"Ferdinand, you're a humbug! And you know as well as I do that it's no use driving a pony unless you are firm. Once let him think you are weak, and he won't do anything."

"Very true," said Ferdinand, gravely; "and now let us look for an untamed Surrey pony, and subdue his savage spirit."

An elderly wag. This quest took some little time.

The first board which announced a pony and chaise to let proved a chimæra. An elderly man, with a pipe in his mouth, said, in response to inquiries, "Well, there be a pony, sure, but he's too old for work. We don't let him out. A chaise, do you say? Oh, yes, there's a chaise, but it's all gone to pieces."

"Then what do you put up that sign for?" demanded Miranda, with some impatience.

The elderly man surveyed the sign critically.

"Oh, yes," he remarked, with a grin. "That's a sign, sure. Well, you see, miss, it's been up there so long that we just let it be."

A COMEDY OF SIGNPOSTS.

*What is a
Battlestone ?*

At last a pony was found—a beautiful dapple-grey, attached to a cart which, as Ferdinand observed, was a regular *gamin* of a cart, with all the impudent rattle of a butcher's shandry. What a drive it was ! The pony began business in the first half-mile by stopping short and attempting to graze by the wayside. "He'll know me better presently," said Miranda, with great determination, and she plied the whip vigorously till Ferdinand suggested that the shafts must fairly ache.

"The shafts ! What *do* you mean ?" said the driver.

"Well, it seems to me you are whipping them more severely than the pony," replied the passenger.

"Ferdinand, you are not a comfortable companion in a Battlestone cart."

"I am not. The back-rail has made a cavity in the small of my spine. But why a Battlestone cart ?"

"How ignorant you are ! Don't you know it is made on the model of a Battlestone ?"

"What is a Battlestone ? Something to do with joints of meat, I suppose, and bad springs."

*Terrific pluck
of the pony.*

Here the pony paused for the eighth time at a public house, and seemed much aggrieved when he was whipped up.

A COMEDY OF SIGNPOSTS.

“Ferdinand, this is disgraceful,” said Miranda. “The man who drives this pony as a rule must be a confirmed drunkard. I wonder he isn’t ashamed to give us such a revelation of his habits.”

Just then they arrived at a brewery, where the pony evidently made up his mind for a resolute stand. No whipping would persuade him to pass the gate. He sidled across the road, backed the cart against the wall, and resorted to all the subterfuges of the equine mind, much to the gratification of the cottagers, who stood in their doorways and enjoyed the struggle.

“A brewery, too,” murmured Ferdinand. “The fountain-head of his chivalry! He knows that if he doesn’t conquer here all is lost. Hadn’t I better get out and take his head?”

“Nothing of the kind. Do you suppose I am going to disgrace myself by giving in now?”

“Very well, dear. Go it! The eyes of Surrey are upon you. Shall I hold the reins while you take the whip in both hands?”

Miranda triumphant. Miranda disdained to reply, and at that moment the pony grudgingly accepted defeat, and ambled on amidst encouraging cries from juvenile spectators.

“There!” exclaimed Miranda, flushed with triumph. “Who is master, pray? No, we won’t

A COMEDY OF SIGNPOSTS.

go back the way we came. You haven't seen anything of the country yet. Ferdinand, did you ever know such a perfectly lovely lane, with all those overhanging trees? Oh, bother!—what a fidget you are! Of course this will take us all right. All we have to do is to make a bend to the left through Puttenham.”

*Mystic seclusion
of Puttenham.*

It is a peculiarity of lovely lanes hereabouts that they all lead by circuitous devices to Puttenham; so that Puttenham, in the mind of the countryside, occupies a position which may be generally described as all points of the compass. The signposts appeared to point towards Puttenham in every direction. Small boys, when interrogated, swept the landscape with their arms, thus indicating that Puttenham was, so to speak, everywhere. It did not matter. The glamour of a June afternoon was upon everything, and the omnipresence yet remoteness of Puttenham was part of the fascinating mystery of Nature. Only the pony was aloof from the general charm, and tacked disconsolately from one side of the road to the other, as if tossed upon a sea of doubt, unilluminated by the beacon-light of a brewery.

*Roses, roses all
the way.*

Suddenly they came upon a delicious little hamlet hidden away in foliage.

“Puttenham,” said Miranda. But no; it was

A COMEDY OF SIGNPOSTS.

Compton, smothered with roses, great masses of them, red and white, spread over the cottages, till little else could be seen, and filling the air with enchanting perfume.

“If it is possible to lie on a bed of roses,” said Ferdinand, “Compton is the site for a mattress. But destiny beckons us on. Excelsior and Puttenham! Miranda, if I did not know that your father, Prospero, parted on good terms with Ariel, I should say that the tricky spirit was leading us a pretty dance in search of this Puttenham. See, there’s another signpost pointing the same way. There’s magic in it. I shall dream to-night that I am pursued by wild signposts. And I shouldn’t be at all surprised to learn that Caliban had been transformed into this pony.”

“Ferdinand,” said Miranda, with a very serious air, “you cannot really suppose that papa would permit such a thing!”

“I make no insinuations against your father, who behaved very well on that island. But here we are, lost in Surrey, and I begin to think that Puttenham is the abode of Mrs. Harris. But if you feel hurt by what I said about the pony, suppose we let him choose the road himself?”

*Justification
of Caliban.*

Another lovely lane, and another signpost, which for a wonder did not

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

point to Puttenham. And the pony, left unchecked, coolly took this turning, and trotted home so fast that the wind nearly blew Miranda's hat away.

"Caliban isn't a bad sort of beast," said Ferdinand, when they alighted.

"But you must own that my driving was a great discipline to him," said Miranda.

"Yes; and that of all carts a Battlestone is the most elegant and commodious."

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

*Mischief
brewing in
Bury Street.*

WE were fellow-lodgers in Bury Street, and, in the language of diplomacy, our relations were strained. He occupied a room above mine, approached by a little staircase which adjoined the partition at the head of my bed; and as the partition was thin, and as he had a fine, athletic manner on the stairs, the noise of his coming and going was exasperating. He was always out in the morning before I rose, and he always came in at night when I had retired; so we never met. But the sound of him night and morning was incessant. To some men it is a necessity of well-being to live in a storm. The bath is accompanied by snatches of turgid

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

song ; they cannot begin the activity of the day without a clatter of heels ; they cannot end it without banging a door. My neighbour was evidently in a state of bounding health ; he could not give directions to the valet except in the most piercing tones of a very high voice ; he could not go up and down stairs without making them reel ; he could not have closed his door quietly to save his life. Noise was as indispensable to him as the breath of his nostrils.

*I do not
love my
neighbour.* Now I happen to have an intense and even morbid distaste for this physical exuberance. To me, the robust man who riots in disturbance is a nuisance like the whistle of a locomotive. When you have nerves which are tortured by any sudden fracture of the air, you are apt to attribute to an unseen person, who moves as if he were a god in a tempest, not merely a gross indelicacy of ear, but a positive moral deformity. When the street-door was slammed, waking me out of my first sleep, I listened for the ascending footsteps with stifled fury. My room was nearly at the top of the house, and as he thundered upon the landing just outside like a regiment at the charge, and paused for a moment before rushing up the little staircase, as if he were taking it by assault, I shouted sometimes with

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

inarticulate rage, and pounded the partition above my head with clenched fist. This occurred repeatedly without attracting his attention, until one morning I heard him asking James, the valet, in the usual uproarious accents, whether the man below was out of his mind.

*Which is the
madman ?*

When James came into my room I was boiling.

“Well, what answer did you make?” I inquired.

“Answer? What to, sir?”

“Didn’t that fellow upstairs ask you if I were a madman?”

James put down the can of hot water, and smiled in the deprecating way of one who has observed hallucinations among the social phenomena up several flights of stairs.

“Oh dear, no, sir,” he said, taking up a hat and brushing it thoughtfully.

“I tell you I heard him distinctly. What did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything,” replied the discreet James. “Mr. Somerset talks a little loud, but he doesn’t mean it.”

“And he doesn’t mean to make a hideous row, I suppose, every night and morning. Which of us is the madman, eh?”

James smiled again, as though this were a

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

pleasantry it was not his place to criticise ; then he brushed the hat with an extravagance of professional interest.

“Well, you can tell him, with my compliments, that if he imagines himself a thunderbolt he will need a keeper before I shall.”

“Yes, sir,” said James, gravely. “Better put on your thicker under-things, sir : it’s turned much colder this morning.”

An exchange of compliments. Possibly I disregarded this advice, for that night I went to bed with a heavy cold, and next day there were disagreeable symptoms of low fever. There was also the customary eruption on the staircase—more violent than ever, as it seemed to me in the new irritation of illness. This was too much. I did not suppose that James had delivered my cartel of defiance, but it was evident that my antagonist was maliciously bent on fresh annoyance.

“Hallo ! you Somerset !” I roared.

“Damn your impertinence ! What do you want ?” answered his shrill voice at my door.

“Keep a civil tongue in your head, and don’t make such an infernal din !”

He went off in a peal of laughter, infuriating to a man stretched helpless in bed, unable to get to explanations at close quarters.

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

"Hang you for an idiot!" I yelled.

He stamped down the stairs, laughing all the way, and I fell back on the pillow, choking. A few minutes later James appeared, silent and serene.

"Did you hear that?" I gasped.

"Oh yes, sir, I heard Mr. Somerset. He has a hearty laugh."

"It's no laughing matter—he has insulted me grossly."

"Has he, indeed, sir?" said the valet, taking up the inevitable hat.

"Confound it, man! put that hat down, and give me a pen. I am not well enough to get up and have it out with him, but I'll write him a letter that will penetrate his hide."

James gazed at the ceiling, as if striving to reconcile this metaphor with the eternal verities.

The biting letter. I gnawed at the end of the pen in a feverish quest for cutting sarcasm. As I do not feel proud of that letter now, I will not set down its terms; but the substance of it was that people who are training for hurdle-races or acrobatic feats ought not to rehearse in places where noise is as great a nuisance to their neighbours as bad manners.

James took the letter impassively, and I lay in bed all day, meditating irony much more biting

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

than anything I had written, and waiting for the obnoxious footsteps. They did not come. I slept soundly without being roused by the familiar crash. In the morning all was still in the room above. James explained that Mr. Somerset had not returned, but had telegraphed for his portmanteau and his letters. Probably he would answer my agreeable missive by post, and I spent some hours of convalescence in wondering whether he had any considerable gift of polished retort.

"Mr. Somerset has not answered my letter James," I remarked to the valet.

"Hasn't he, really, sir?" said James, in a tone of deferential surprise.

"Have you heard from him?"

"Oh yes, sir, this morning; but he didn't send any message for you."

There was a suspicion of mockery in this, and I looked at him hard, but saw absolutely nothing in his face to suggest the sardonic humorist. James was trim and middle-aged, with a certain fixity of gaze and a tightness about the mouth, symbols, no doubt, of that mental concentration which belongs to a life spent in brushing trousers.

*A hero to his
valet.*

This was the first morning I was able to leave my room, and as I dressed I could not help thinking that there was, after all,

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

something odd in the valet's manner. Somerset had lodged in the house for ten years, and it was quite possible that James was a good deal attached to him. There might be, for aught I knew, confidential relations between them. Certainly, when I came to think of it, there was a note of pride in the valet's tone as he spoke of the letter he had received. It was like the pride of an old servant, shrewd and reticent, who permits himself only in this fleeting way any suggestion of the confidence reposed in him.

This might be only an idle fancy of mine, but it nettled my curiosity ; possibly it ignited a spark of jealousy. What was it in this bull-in-a-china-shop, who had been so offensive to me—what was it that made him a hero to his valet ?

Singular behaviour of the valet.

Just then I heard James moving about in the room overhead. He was energetic with the coal-scuttle ; a match was struck ; he was lighting the fire. Clearly Somerset was expected back ; at any rate, I should like to question James on the subject. So I finished dressing, and walked up the little staircase softly and elegantly—such a contrast to the deportment of the absent genius of tumult ; such a lesson if he could only have witnessed it !

I opened the bedroom door quietly, and beheld a

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

curious sight. James was on his knees, busy with a small drawer full of packets of letters which he was burning. The first of them was in the fire, and a brilliant tongue of flame glittered in the glass of a large photograph in a frame on the dressing-table. It was the picture of a woman, evidently a beautiful creature, with rather heavy eyebrows, which, in the peculiar light, gave the face an expression of scornful amusement.

The valet raised his head, and was on his feet in an instant.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, "this is Mr. Somerset's room."

"With which you seem to be making rather free." His voice annoyed me, though it was perfectly respectful.

"I have Mr. Somerset's orders to destroy these letters—but not in your presence, sir," he added, looking straight at me with those eyes which had stared so long at clothes-brushes that they had lost all speculation.

I was not in a position to argue the point, so there was nothing open but retreat.

"Very good, James. I don't wish to pry into other people's affairs, especially in small drawers which I presume they are in the habit of keeping locked. I merely wanted to ask you whether Mr. Somerset will return to-day."

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

Strangely enough, it was this innocent question which disturbed his equanimity. He stooped to pick up a bundle of letters with a trembling hand, and when he looked at me again he was very pale. Still he answered steadily, "No, sir ; he will not."

*An exciting
mystery.*

I went away, completely puzzled, and more curious than ever. Here was a mystery, and I liked mysteries. All my resentment against Somerset had died out, and it was succeeded by a sentiment of respect—even of admiration—for this man I had never seen who had a secret, which seemed to carry a foreboding. The valet's pallid face came between me and my work ; I saw it as I walked along the street. It thrust itself even among the "types of beauty" in the shop-window where I was wont to seek pictorial refreshment of an afternoon. I bought a paper, and the face was in the leading article, dim, but visible. I turned the page, but the haunting image gazed at me with vivid distinctness from a paragraph headed "Fatal Accident on the Brighton Railway." A mangled body had been found that morning by some platelayers in a tunnel, and identified as—good God!—Mr. Henry Somerset. "It appears that the unfortunate gentleman, who had been staying at the Hotel Métropole, Brighton, for the past week, was returning to town by the

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

midnight train, and it is supposed that the door of the compartment must have been unfastened, and that, in leaning against it, he was thrown out. Mr. Somerset, who was about thirty-five years of age, was a civil engineer, and had made striking progress in his profession. He was an Oxford man, celebrated at the University in his day for his prowess as an athlete, and extremely popular among his friends for his geniality and high spirits. Mr. Somerset was unmarried. We understand that all who were privileged to know him are agreed that there was absolutely no motive for suicide. He was in the prime of health, vigour, and prosperity."

It deepens. I was perfectly dazed, and read this piece of news again and again, especially the last sentence, before I could attach any meaning to it. Then I remembered James's agitation when he answered my question about Somerset's return. The valet was one of those who were privileged to know that hapless man. And how had he learned early this morning that Somerset would not come back to-day? "*No, he will not!*" Was there some ghastly certainty in those simple words?

It was past midnight when I returned to the house in Bury Street, with shaken nerves. In the hall there was a ledge on which the bedroom candlesticks of the inmates were placed by James

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

before he retired to rest in the basement. As a rule, at this hour, there were two candles on the ledge, my own and Somerset's. And there were two now ! James had forgotten that one would not be needed ; or had he purposely left it there ? I felt irritated by this perversity, and had half a mind to call him up. Lighting my candle at the little jet of gas, which burned all night, I was turning towards the stairs, when my foot struck against something in a dark angle of the passage. I stooped to examine the obstruction, and saw with a sudden shiver that it was Somerset's portmanteau. Had it been his body I could scarcely have had a greater shock. This inanimate thing had been within touch of him when he met his death. There was about it all the horror of a witness. If it could speak, it could tell whether he fell out of the carriage by accident, or whether——!

The visitor. I stumbled upstairs to my room with curdling veins ; and only when I had shut the door and turned the key did I seem able to breathe. Up went the gas ; what a comfort it was to see my surroundings reduced to their rational proportions ! The bedstead was solid ; there was a cheering conviction of reality in the wardrobe, though its profession of mahogany may have been only veneer. A photograph of an old friend on the mantelpiece

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

recalled an amusing story. Let me see—how did it go? He was returning from a dinner-party—oh, of course, I remembered it perfectly—and the horse would walk on the pavement, and stare at the posters on the hoardings; and just when they got to the Archway Tavern—God! what was that?

Quite distinctly I heard the street door closed; there were steps in the hall; somebody was taking a candlestick—the other candlestick! Then the steps began to ascend very softly, not with the roystering carelessness I knew so well. It could not be *he*! It must be some belated or unexpected lodger on a lower floor. No; the steps came up higher, higher; they reached the landing; they paused outside my door. Then there was a gentle tap.

For I moment I thought I was
The apology. utterly incapable of speech; then my voice burst from me in a shriek—

“Who is it?”

“It is I—Somerset. I want to apologise to you for having disturbed you so much. I was very thoughtless and inconsiderate. James sent me word that you were ill. I am really very sorry. But you won’t have to complain any more. I am quiet now—very quiet—quiet.”

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

These were not the boisterous tones of old. He spoke so low that I could scarcely catch the words, and they died away in a sigh. Then the steps went up the little staircase—less like footfalls than like a rustle of wind.

I sat on the bed in a cold sweat. Was this hallucination? Or—the thought rose with the healing wings of new-born hope—had there been a blunder in the identification of the body in the tunnel? His portmanteau was in the hall. I had heard his voice. He had spoken to me with kindness and forbearance. Thank God, he was safe and sound! But I—what a miserable creature I was! I had made no return for his goodwill. I had not thanked him for overlooking that damnable letter. He was a gentleman every inch of him, and I was a poltroon and a fool. Stay! It was not too late to make amends. He was in his room. I would go there, and clasp his hand, and we would thank heaven together for his preservation.

I seized the candle, and I had opened the door, when there was a crash of glass above, and then a cry—a long cry of anguish—followed by a convulsive sob.

I bounded up the staircase shouting, “I’m coming, Somerset; I’ll help you, man!”

But the room was empty. In a flash I saw two

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

things—the small drawer had been pulled out—the drawer which contained the letters that James had burnt—and on the floor, with the glass face smashed to atoms, lay the picture of the woman.

"He might have trusted me!" I must have swooned, for when I came to myself James was bending over me with anxious scrutiny.

"You have seen him?" were his first words.

"No, but he has been here," I answered.

He glanced at the fallen photograph with a frown, and then very wistfully at the open drawer, muttering, "He might have trusted me."

"Yes, James," I said; "but perhaps he repented, and wished to see the letters again."

The valet's face was suddenly illuminated by the most wonderful look of fidelity and affection I have ever seen in a man's eyes. It was gone in an instant, and in his old, phlegmatic way he said, "Hadn't you better get to bed, sir?"

*The valet is
jealous.*

He stayed in my room, sleeping in the easy-chair, while I tossed in half-delirious slumber. In the morning I was roused by his entrance with the hot water. There was not a trace of the night's emotion in his immovable features.

"The inquest is to-day, James," I said, eyeing him narrowly.

THE GHOST OF AN APOLOGY.

"I know, sir."

"You read that paragraph in the *St. James's Gazette* yesterday?"

"I did, sir."

"And you, as one of those who were privileged to know him, absolutely repudiate the idea of suicide?"

He was silent.

"You will give evidence, James?"

"Not a word, sir."

After a while I said, "It was good of him not to be offended by that stupid letter of mine."

He looked at me with sharp suspicion.

"How do you know that, sir?"

"He stood at my door last night, James, and apologised to me. He said you had sent him word that I was ill, and the letter was not even mentioned."

The valet scowled. I believe he was jealous of that unearthly visit!

"Mr. Somerset never had your letter," he said sullenly. "I didn't send it."

"Then you took a great liberty, James."

"Oh yes, sir!" And he brushed my hat with much energy.

ON BOHEMIANS.

*How the last
Bohemian died.* THEY are spoken of usually as an extinct species, whose fossil remains are occasionally lighted upon by antiquarians, and take the form of drinking vessels, two-pronged forks with bone handles, and pipes. The Bohemians appear to have died out about twenty-five years back ; though I have heard it said that one night in Piccadilly, a few months ago, a strange-looking man in a rusty velveteen coat, with his hair and beard matted, stood outside a literary club for some time, and then fell down in a fit. At the hospital he recovered consciousness enough to say quite distinctly, "There's too much respectability now even in an academic pot-house ;" and then he died. This, I have no doubt, was the last of the Bohemians, killed by our boasted civilisation, just as the noble red man is extinguished by the stove-pipe hat and the fire-water of the pale-faces.

*His simple
philosophy.* As far as I can understand, the habits of the Bohemian were nocturnal. He was wont to come out of Covent Garden "at the witching hour when the vegetables were coming in." The Bohemian drank beer from the purling tap. In Maupassant's "Boule de Suif" there is a toper who passes his life in pro-

ON BOHEMIANS.

claiming the affinity between “le Pale Ale et la Révolution.” For the Bohemian, I imagine, the affinity of beer with literature and the drama needed no proclamation. It was one of the elementary facts of nature. To lay down the pen and take up the tankard was a process which belonged to what the man of science would call the reflex action of genius. It was automatic, like the motion of the stars, the inclination of a flower towards the sun, and all the great, beautiful, and simple operations of natural law.

*His favourite
dish.*

The visitor to Fleet Street is always taken to see an old haunt of the Bohemian, preserved pretty much in its original state, with sanded floor and partitioned benches. Here you have some inkling of the literary mastodon’s appetite from a traditional dish, a savoury pudding, of which the Bohemian consumed huge quantities. It is quite as succulent as the leg of mutton which Lucy, you remember, was bidden to get ready at three :—

“And when it has served for the master,
 ’Twill amply suffice for the maid ;
Meanwhile, I will smoke my canaster,
 And tipple my ale in the shade.”

*His most
famous haunt.*

By all accounts, the maid had very little of the pudding when the Bohe-

ON BOHEMIANS.

mian had done with it. Personally, I cannot say it is to my taste, though I have eaten it in a purely scientific spirit, to reconstruct the Bohemian from the gravy, just as Cuvier articulated the ichthyosaurus from a single bone. I have tippled my ale in the shade of Wine Office Court, and rubbed my shoes on the sanded floor, in the spirit of antiquarian zeal. Now and then I dine there with some kindred souls, under the presiding eye of a humorous Philistine with a mellow voice ; and we smoke "churchwardens," and do all that may become the disinterested student to revive the atmosphere, the sentiments, the personality of the old stock who took their ease in their inn. So far as I am concerned, it is a most disquieting masquerade ; for to take in tobacco at the pores, after a meal that ends with cheese, toasted in what I believe to be its native tin, provokes unseemly combat between an imagination which bravely conjures up the primeval Bohemian and a constitution which denotes a sicklier generation. Through the clouds of canaster I fancy there looms the heroic form of Fred Bayham, who smites his chest and cries, "Manly, sir, manly !" then takes a pull at the contiguous pewter, and departs anon for some scene of fashionable gaiety at the other end of the town, where he will disport himself in a shirt borrowed from the Reverend

ON BOHEMIANS.

Charles Honeyman. Oh, immortal F. B., if you could only appear to us in good sooth, and tell us the secret of Bohemian vigour in these stifling fumes, which to you were as the salt breeze to the buoyant mariner !

*The increasing
refinement of
manners.*

Of course, we comfort ourselves with the reflection that since the Deluge—an event which, to the best of my knowledge of historical records, was contemporaneous with the advent of the Penny Press—we have outgrown the habits of the antediluvian Bohemian. You read grave discourses on the increasing refinement of manners ; and, indeed, it may be admitted that, instead of hobnobbing at the “Owl’s Roost” or the “Cider Cellars,” the descendants of the Bohemian are seen eating ices at the Academy *soirée*. Young men who write audacious novels and verse that desolates our hearths and homes would be grievously disturbed by a speck of dust on a faultless frock coat. A novelist, who has often done battle with the arbiters of old-fashioned decorum, is scrupulous in his attendance at afternoon teas. Possibly the ichthyosaurus, if he could revisit the glimpses of the social moon, would remark that the outside of the cup and platter is more fastidiously burnished than it was in his day. He might add that he saw

ON BOHEMIANS.

still more point than of yore in the cynical quatrain which a French writer bequeathed to the altruists :—

“Si vous êtes dans la détresse,
O mes amis, cachez-le bien,
Car l'homme est bon et s'intéresse
A ceux qui n'ont besoin de rien !”

Conservatism of the Bohemian. At all events we should find him singularly conservative, this Bohemian, who is often described as if he stood for all that was revolutionary in manners and conduct. If we could resuscitate him now in the club smoking-room, where he would not be allowed to puff his canaster from a pipe, and where his innocent call for a pot of porter would give a Norman arch to the eyebrow of the waiter, his views of life might strike many auditors as prim. He, in his turn, would be surprised by the impersonal attitude which we moderns adopt towards the problems of the universe. Neutrality in these high matters is now the stamp of breeding; and the Bohemian, accustomed to rich utterance on all that pertains to the state of man, would discover that the monologue is a discarded form of social intercourse.

His morality vindicated. This raises the horrid suspicion that, had the pariah in velveteen found access to that club in Piccadilly, he would not have

ON BOHEMIANS.

fallen down in a fit, but would have been exalted by the contemplation of his own superior virtue. A rugged simplicity sustained on ale, a belief in old canons of art and morals, enforced by copious rhetoric and the strongest tobacco, might confound the most decorous Laodicean amongst us. I believe that if the Bohemian were suddenly reincarnated I should blush for the aimless conventionality of my existence. "Sir," I should say to him, "I perceive the wrong which we have done you. Too much has been written about the superficial aspects of your life—the junketting at unearthly hours, the disregard of duties prescribed to the citizen by the State, the indifference to a respectable standard of dress, the occasional lapses—pray excuse my freedom—from strict sobriety. But little heed is paid now to your really fine appreciation of abstract principles. In the writings of a man of genius who became famous since your day there is a soldier of fortune who describes most happily and persuasively the essential need of faith in good, strong, simple dogmas, and the comparative unimportance of conventional observances. I recognise in you a shining example of this great truth. Our life is more artificial than yours was, our code of decorum more rigorous ; yet who can say we are better in act or aspiration ? I have striven to do justice to your memory by breathing the air you breathed.

ON BOHEMIANS.

I have sought wisdom from the sanded floor, and joy from the purling tap. Frankly, I detest them both, and the canaster nearly asphyxiates me. But if you, O most maligned Bohemian, you, who might be the legitimate Mahatma of an incredulous age, bid me to persevere, I shall obey ! ”

His magnanimity. And he would reply : “ My boy, these are the words of sense, though we used to put the truth more bluntly at the ‘ Owl’s Roost.’ Trust me, the old Bohemians were a jolly sight better than your Decadent, who has a clean shirt every day, and drinks some diabolical potion out of crystal. And I don’t think we were any worse than your superfine lecturer in leading articles on our deplorable misbehaviour. In this wretched hole you call a club, I don’t see how any man can slap his chest and be manly ; but you must make the best of it. Thank you ! I *will* take another pint ; and I don’t blame you for smuggling me away in a corner out of sight of Jeames. What ? He’s an M.P. ! Well, at the ‘ Owl’s Roost ’ there was no mistaking a member for the potboy ! Here’s your health, and more power to your philosophy ! ”

Free beer and the simple life. Down my street there is a club where beer and bread and cheese are free, by virtue of a tradition which is the very

A DOVE-LIKE INTERVIEWER.

transcendentalism of Bohemia. If I ever get elected there, it may be easier to lead the simple life !

A DOVE-LIKE INTERVIEWER.

*An act of
culpable
weakness.*

A SPRIGHTLY article in one of the magazines on interviewing, by an expert in that art, recalls to me, through one of the myriad avenues of remorse, an act of culpable weakness. I happened to be, years and years ago, in a certain American city, with a distinguished person. He was beset by interviewers from morn till eve, and it was part of my duty to keep them at bay and in a good humour. Do you know what it is to withstand the spirit of independent curiosity which waves the Stars and Stripes ? Leonidas at Thermopylæ, Horatius holding the bridge, are mighty well in tradition ; but what would their prowess have availed against an interviewer, especially an interviewer in petticoats ?

*The distin-
guished person
is wary.*

In that American city there dwelt a lady who wrote with great vigour and industry in many papers. One morning her card was brought to the distinguished person, together with another, which also bore a

A DOVE-LIKE INTERVIEWER.

feminine name. "I can't see them," said the D. P.; "you must find out what they want, and tell them as little as possible." The art of interviewing, you perceive, is surpassed by the art of being interviewed, which consists in discoursing with judicious fulness about nothing at all. Now it was obviously too great a strain on my resources to talk at large to both ladies. A choice must be made—a judgment of Paris. Which of them was—not the better-looking : that element was rigidly excluded from the case—but the more sympathetic, the more delicately and harmoniously receptive ?

*Importance of
being sym-
pathetic.*

I presented myself first to the lady of industry and vigour. Her aspect chilled me ; she was evidently annoyed to see a deputy, and not the D. P., who had retired into the vague. She had a steely eye, and her mouth closed with a little snap, which was not prepossessing. There was no sympathy here ; on the contrary, certain allusions to the D. P.'s mysterious seclusion, in a country where unrestricted inquiry into your neighbour's affairs was the birth-right of the free-born, seemed to border on satire. I took my leave with embarrassed generalities, and sought the other lady. Ah ! what a difference, what subtle charm, what a pair of eyes ! They had nothing to do with the matter, of course ;

A DOVE-LIKE INTERVIEWER.

still, when a woman has fine eyes, you cannot treat them as if they were opaque and lustreless. And she fixed them upon me with such a look of timid appeal ! Bless me, if here was not an interviewer who was actually apologetic, and even entreating !

"Only a beginner." "I am only a beginner," she explained ; "I have never done an interview before." Thank heaven ! "It would be so good of you to help me to make a start." I felt that it would ! "You see, I am not very well off, and it is necessary for me to make my own livelihood"—O Golconda ! why could I not pour thy treasures into her lap at that instant ?—"and my editor says that if I execute this commission successfully he will give me others." Then she smiled, and that settled the business. How could I refuse to aid this fluttering little enterprise ? Was it for me, with callous heel, to stamp on such a tender young ambition ? Besides, here was the sympathetic ear (a very pretty little ear, though that was irrelevant)—here was the receptive mind. An hour's chat with her would be an agreeable way of opening a promising career, and making a fresh halo for the D. P. brooding in the vague.

A well-spent morning. That hour's chat lasted a whole morning. The judicious fulness about nothing at all expanded amazingly. This, I saw, was

A DOVE-LIKE INTERVIEWER.

to be an epoch-making interview, and I unlocked the inmost recesses of biographical anecdote. She took notes in a dainty book with a dainty pencil, and presently asked, with becoming hesitation, whether I would show her the room where the D. P. sat and revolved great ideas. Into that apartment she peeped like Fatima into Bluebeard's closet, glancing hastily at the furniture, the window-curtains, and a small bottle which an inadvertent waiter had left in a corner. She enveloped everything in a bird's-eye view, a dove-like glimpse ; and I felt that in this interview, at all events, there would be no unpardonable freedoms with intimate details. Then she said she had taken up a great deal of my valuable time. I had told her so much that she did not know how she was going to put it into shape, but she had a dear friend who understood this business very well, and would be sure to help her. I started when I heard the dear friend's name, for she was the lady with the steely eye, and the mouth that closed with a little snap ; but I forgot her when my fair interviewer beamed on me gratefully with those astonishing eyes, and when a soft, small hand left behind it a pressure of farewell that was like a tangible regret.

A fatal bottle.

A few days later I journeyed with the D. P. to another city, and on the

A DOVE-LIKE INTERVIEWER.

way we searched the Sunday papers for that interview. He found it, and read with a lowering brow.

"What sort of a woman was this interviewer?" he asked.

"Oh, a charming girl, *naïve*, winning, full of sympathy!" I replied.

"Ha!" said he, and went on reading. When he reached the bottom of the column he looked at me fixedly. "So you arranged that the interview was to be with me, eh?"

"Yes, so much more interesting, you know."

"And you showed her my room?"

"Well, just for the sake of local colour, a sort of background."

"Ha! And when you kindly impersonated me, was I sitting at breakfast, drinking champagne?"

"Good gracious, no! Nothing was said about breakfast."

"Then what does she mean by saying that 'the table was littered with the remnants of a hearty meal, and an empty bottle of Pommery showed that the day had begun in excellent spirits?'"

*Was she shy
or sly?*

This was the contribution of the small bottle in the corner to the local colour!

"Very *naïve* and winning!" continued the D. P. "Here's another sympathetic touch. 'His

A DOVE-LIKE INTERVIEWER.

devotion to tobacco is extraordinary, and he generally smokes a hundred cigars a day.’”

“My stars! I *did* say you were a great smoker, but a hundred——”

“And I have a favourite dog which has been trained to dance the polka when I am shaving!”

I groaned aloud. “Certainly I mentioned the dog as a clever little beast, but the polka——”

“When I am at home, I go a great deal into society at Mile End!”

“Good heavens! I told her you once attended a meeting there for a charitable purpose!”

“Ha! Doesn’t it strike you that this *naïve* young woman was making a fool of you all the time?”

I gasped with indignation. “Why, she was a simple, trusting, inexperienced little thing, with eyes full of——”

“Sympathy! I know! Ha!”

“She told me it was her first interview, and I’ll swear she never made these awful blunders out of malice. Stay!”

I suddenly remembered her dear friend, the lady who wrote with great industry and vigour. Was it possible that *she* had corrected the interview in a spirit of resentment against the judgment of Paris? That remains a mystery; but often in the years that have gone have I been racked by suspicion of

THE SILENT ONLOOKER.

my soft-eyed novice. Was it pure ignorance or sardonic mirth that lay beneath that appealing grace? Well, she has long had my forgiveness. Peace to her dainty pencil!

THE SILENT ONLOOKER.

A dream of fair dowagers. "AT my end of the town," as the Duke of St. Olphert's would say, the spasms of the dying season make a cheerful noise about two in the morning. The humble attic I occupy looks out upon baronial halls which, at that hour, are alive with dowagers and other fascinations, including Mr. Anstey's

Hughies, Berties, Archies,
In the Guards, don't ye know ;
With silken, long moustaches,
In the Guards, don't ye know ;

and with dazzling white ties, recalling to my mind Mr. Tree as Beau Austin before the mirror, achieving with the fifth tie that miracle which throws the valet into ecstasy. "It's a dream, Mr. George!"

The miraculous necktie. When I meet Hughie, dressed for the evening's conquests, I always want to stop him, and say, "How do you manage it, Mr.

THE SILENT ONLOOKER.

George? How do you dream that tie into the exquisitely invisible knot in the mathematically calculated middle?" That would be a charity to Hughie, for he could regale the dowagers with the experience. "Stopped by a mad Johnnie, don't ye know. Called me George, by Jove! Wanted me to tell him how I tied my necktie! Don't know what this democracy is coming to. Lucky there's a Tory majority!" Well, about two in the morning, the baronial halls are disgorging the gilded throng, and I am aroused from slumber, peaceful as an infant's, by a roar of "Lady Muzzletuzzle's carriage!" and so on, in stentorian accents, through half the peerage.

*Impressiveness
of titles.*

It is astonishing how impressive a title sounds, borne upwards on a deferential wave to a humble attic and a newly awakened ear. Besides, I once had the honour of a conversation with Lady Muzzletuzzle; that is to say, I listened with monosyllabic interest to her ladyship's discourse upon the sad changes in London Society since she was a girl. Forty years ago the tide of blue blood flowed pure up marble stairs. Unless you were a scion of a noble house, you could no more get a card for a baronial "crush" than mount visibly to heaven from a donkey-cart. Society was very small then; it was not, as in the

THE SILENT ONLOOKER.

Byronic jeer, a horde composed of the "bores and bored," but a dignified blend of Lady Muzzletuzzle's youth and beauty with the wisdom of illustrious grandsires ; whereas *now*—

" Baron Strumbalberger's carriage!"

Aspiring Judee. wings triumphant on the morning air. Baron Strumbalberger is a member of a great commercial house, of Teutonic extraction, with a Hebraic tinge. His grandsire graduated in the humbler commodities of Hamburg, and rumour has it that this tradition will shortly blend with the lineage of the Muzzletuzzles, a mingling of two potent streams, like the union of the Rhone and the Saône. I wonder whether this commanding image occurs to Hughie, a luckless offshoot of an old county family, who has probably been pulling his "silken, long moustaches" rather grimly at the spectacle of a Strumbalberger's attentions to Lady Muzzletuzzle's niece. Is he speculating vaguely why a Tory majority of a hundred-and-everything doesn't keep the Rhone of birth apart from the Saône of the German shop? Or does he simply stroll into White's to dilute the flood of his emotions with a whisky-and-soda? Well, the stentorian accents from below are dying down in a drowsy murmur; and the attic is too sleepy to pursue the possible meditations of Hughie.

THE SILENT ONLOOKER.

*The old iron
extinguisher* About four o'clock on these occasions, I wake with a pang from a dream of the aristocracy (before the later blend)—a dream illuminated by flambeaux. No *flâneur* in London fails to notice the iron extinguishers outside old houses, where the link-boys lighted the Muzzle-tuzzle family up the ancestral steps, and then put out the torches. The iron extinguisher is an affecting sight. Lights hidden under bushels do not excite my sympathies—where, by the way, *is* the bushel in these days of advertisement?—but the extinguisher suggests a “flaming minister” which cannot be relumed, which was wont to shed its beams on youth and beauty, when Lady Muzzle-tuzzle was a girl. I can see the link-boy holding his flambeau aloft, then thrusting it into the iron cavity which blotted it out, that it might not shine on earthly commonplaces, but be relighted the next night, to perform its devotional office of glowing upon Lady Muzzletuzzle’s girlish charms.

*A touch of
nightmare.* That extinguisher preys upon my spirits, and will not let me go to sleep again. Is there no obliging ghost of a link-boy who will come back, flambeau and all, and rekindle the glories which faded with Lady M.’s sylph-hood? I have a dark misgiving about that extinguisher. If a revolution should break upon us, and the streets

THE SILENT ONLOOKER.

should run with blue blood, or blood of a bluish tint (the fluid of the later blend), a demented populace may use the iron extinguishers for cracking the sconces of Lady Muzzletuzzle's descendants. . . . Evidently, I have a touch of nightmare !

*Some stentorian
echoes.* To escape from morbid thoughts (it is now five o'clock, and I am wide awake), I seek refuge in cheering recollections of stentorian voices. One comes back to me with peculiar significance. It is the voice of the toastmaster at public dinners. He is a man with a confident eye and an expanding chest ; and, as he stands behind the chairman, into whose ear he murmurs confidentially, as who should say, "Cheer up ; I'll see you through !" that subordinate functionary shrinks to a mere cipher. Then comes a voice like an organ-peal : "My lords and gentlemen, please to charge your glasses. Pray silence for your chairman, Adolphus Slimkins, Esquire." Poor Slimkins, who has a deprecating treble, looks as if he would like to remark, "My lords and gentlemen, I have really no business in this chair. The toastmaster, as you know, is the arbitrary genius of public dinners ; and when he calls your particular attention to me, I feel that my proper place would be under the table, if that position were not prejudicial to the character of a total abstainer."

THE SILENT ONLOOKER.

*The Grand Toast-
master of the
Press.*

The toastmaster, indeed, is a symbol of that stimulus to degeneracy which Max Nordau deplores. He complains that the newspapers, instead of ignoring degenerates like Ibsen and Tolstoi, are always proclaiming their lamentable eccentricities. The Press is a Grand Toastmaster, who cries "My lords and gentlemen, pray silence for your mattoid, Henrik Ibsen, Esquire!" or "Please to charge your inkstands. Pray silence for your graphomaniac, Count Leo Tolstoi!" Of course, the Grand Toastmaster, when such degenerates strive to fill the chair, ought either to overwhelm them with obloquy or take absolutely no notice of them.

*Romeo and
Juliet up to
date.*

The season dies hardest when it has received what the elder novelists used to call a dastard blow from a dissolving Parliament. Strange that the round of philosophy and gaiety, which has its centre about the middle of Half-Moon Street—this is the speculation of an amateur geographer, who makes no pretensions to be an expert—should be broken by the whim of a Minister, or the caprice of a Parliamentary majority! In one of Bulwer's stories a gentleman, who is engaged in the black art, makes a magic circle with paraffin lamps in a convenient field, and passes an anxious night in keeping the lamps alight, to hold

THE SILENT ONLOOKER.

at bay the horde of mysterious foes, who are heard stamping and champing in the darkness. Why have the incandescent sentries of Society availed not to check the stampede of wild M.P.'s, hasting to their constituencies, and trampling in a mad rush upon what Sir Barnes Newcome described as the poetry of the affections? In a balcony, faintly illumined by a mild electric ray, I see Romeo and Juliet lingering over the last good-night, Juliet in her best evening frock, and Romeo in a white waistcoat, bared manfully to the dews of heaven, for the weather is warm, and a tropical languor lurks even in the cold-water tap of the club lavatory. Says Juliet, "Must you go?" and Romeo replies, "Off to-morrow by first train—awful bore!—agent says the other side are circulating scandalous report." "What is that, dear?" says Juliet. "That I have eloped with grocer's daughter," replies Romeo. "Must turn up to contradict that. Dissenters in my constituency very strong, you know." And so he clambers down, not the balcony pillars, but the grand staircase, on which Montagues and Capulets, who bite their thumbs at one another in the House, are jammed together in struggling and perspiring amity.

*The humours of
afternoon teas.*

The vigour of the season shines chiefly in its afternoon teas. For a

THE SILENT ONLOOKER.

crush on the stairs about eleven p.m. you have been fortified by dinner, and there is a sustaining possibility of supper in the sweltering beyond. But for afternoon tea you are physically and spiritually unprepared. The sparkle of the wine-cup (it is very good at the club for the really small price of half-a-crown the pint) has not yet glanced through your brain, kindling there the spirit of fantasy. That nimble wit of yours yawns lazily at five o'clock, and grows sullen when invited to be gay on a beaker of Bohea. Nothing is more heroic than the energy with which Society gathers its forces of an afternoon, to storm the breach in the Castle of Ennui, and, tea-cup in hand, plant the banner of intellect on the walls of the citadel. I admire the zeal of eminent humorists in this fatiguing exercise. They arrive in a dispirited state, evidently unhopeful of any flashes of merriment. I believe the eminent humorist goes out to tea on a forlorn quest for quips which are so unlikely to come to him when he is wearing, not vine, but tea-leaves, in his hair. As soon as he enters the room he is engaged in conversation by the sprightly hostess, while a crowd of expectant auditors wait, open-mouthed, for the flow of soul.

S. H. How late you are ! I fear you will find the tea as flat as the conversation.

THE SILENT ONLOOKER.

E. H. (*dejectedly*). Not at all, I am sure. They both recall the delicious repartees of thirty years ago.

[EXPECTANT AUDITORS, *rather puzzled, smiled feebly.*

S. H. (*after a pause*). That's a quotation, isn't it? Why, of course, it's the advertisement of tea that's on all the hoardings. *You know.* (*Explains origin of joke to EXPECTANT AUDITORS.*)

E. A.'s. Oh, yes! How *very* amusing!

[EMINENT HUMORIST *nibbles cake and sighs heavily.*

*Have a care,
Publishers!* At this juncture another humorist saunters upon the scene, and nods wearily to his brother in affliction. The expectant auditors are more alert than ever, for they have an incurable belief that, when eminent humorists foregather, the air is sure to scintillate with wagery. The sprightly hostess looks archly at the pair, and whispers audibly, "Aren't they *too* funny?" which sends a ripple of anticipation through the admiring circle.

FIRST E. H. How's the market?

SECOND E. H. Had a straight talk with my publisher this morning. He said times were bad, and he couldn't afford to go on paying me four shillings a copy on a three-and-sixpenny book.

THE SILENT ONLOOKER.

FIRST E. H. The greed of these middlemen is astounding !

SECOND E. H. Well, he went on in that strain for some time ; said he should die a beggar, and his orphans would have to sell toy-monkeys in Cheapside ; and then I said I had an offer of five shillings a copy for my next book, "Fops and Frumps." You should have seen the change that came over him ! He went down on his knees, and begged me not to desert his wife and family.

FIRST E. H. I tell you what it is. The time has come for a final settlement with these publishers. We must take over the whole business, and pay them each a small allowance—just enough to keep them alive in some cheap out-of-the-way place, like Sark.

SECOND E. H. Just so. I've been figuring the whole thing out. Five-and-sixpence a week for a family, and three shillings for a single man, with a free ounce of tobacco at Christmas, and twopence a quarter for amusements, circulating library, and merry-go-rounds. Every child, on attaining the age of twenty-five, to receive a copy of "Fops and Frumps." I think that's liberal.

FIRST E. H. Liberal ! I call it princely. What a head you have for organisation !

SPRIGHTLY HOSTESS (*to EXPECTANT AUDITORS at the door*). *Must you go ?* What did those two

A QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA.

talk about? A Home for Lost and Starving Publishers? What a beautiful idea! But, there—I always say that witty men have such good hearts! (*To CONSCIENTIOUS PUBLIC SERVANT who arrives breathless.*) Dreadful man! Where have you been?

C. P. S. So sorry—no tea, thanks—too stimulating—a little hot water with a dash of milk—had awful afternoon—change of Ministry, you know—new chief—he had to be introduced to the office—he was most embarrassed—my heart bled for him—another plate of macaroons, please.

POPULAR ACTRESS (*with interest*). Has he a good part?

C. P. S. I should think so! He stars at five thousand a year, and the office does the work.

P. A. So the company always say.

ON A CERTAIN QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA.

The drama of THE Babel of tongues on the
Babel. London stage often has a perturbing effect on the dramatic critics. I found one of them seated on a bench in St. James's Park the other

A QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA.

afternoon, deep in study. When I addressed him, he looked at me with a wan smile, and murmured, "Parbleu, Corpo di Baccho, Ja wohl!" Then, rousing himself gradually, from a sort of polyglot torpor, he added, "Excuse me, Herr Signor, I speak ze Engleesh not very well. Hang it all, man! who would be a dramatic critic in these days? Can you wonder that I am forgetting my own language? Look at this." He held out to me a small volume, which appeared to be a grammar of the Kamschatkan tongue. "I tell you it is no joke. There's a Kamschatkan company at Drury Lane all this week, and last night I had to write three notices of the play without understanding one word! There was a parcel of schoolgirls behind me, and they laughed in the right places, and said, 'Isn't that deliciously Kamschatkan?' It was maddening. And when I asked Archer for a tip or two, he said that Kamschatkan is very like Fijian, into which he had just translated 'The Roast Beef of Old England!' By Jove, sir! it's enough to drive a beggar to suicide!" Here he cast a morbid glance at the lake, where a select circle of ducks was engaged in an animated conversation.

*A dose of
synopsis.*

There was a strange irony in the scene. Scattered about us were the

A QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA.

forms of citizens who seek repose here from exhausting toil every summer day. They were coiled on the benches in all the picturesque attitudes of siesta and an easy conscience, while the dramatic critic, worn and sleepless, wrestled with the Kamschatkan symbols. "A pretty look-out for the English drama," he went on gloomily ; "another week or two of this foreign jargon, and I sha'n't be able to comprehend a word of English, even at the Adelphi. Why, sir, my wife burst out crying this morning, because our eldest youngster asked me for sixpence, and I couldn't understand him." The remembrance of this domestic pathos overcame my friend, and he brushed away a tear. "But didn't you get any help at Drury Lane," I asked, "from the synopsis of the play which is usually supplied on such occasions?" "The synopsis!" he echoed, producing a document from his pocket. "Try it, my boy. It's like that stuff they advertise in the omnibuses, with a picture of an old gentleman in a wig, who says that, for keeping the head cool, there's nothing to compare with it. Let us see how a dose of synopsis cools your fevered brain!"

*Kamschatkans
at home.*

I took the paper, and read :—Act I.
Scene—A Kamschatkan interior. A
table with a bottle on it. Distant view of a bed.

A QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA.

Robert comes home from Tartary, where he has been selling nutmeg-graters. He sees his father, mother, and sister, and shakes hands with them. The village blacksmith comes in with his hat on. They shake hands. Robert says he has a friend outside with a check suit. Father asks where this came from. Robert refuses to tell. Friend, who has a very long beard, comes in and shakes family by the hand. Father says, "Where did you get your dittos?" In excitement of the moment, village blacksmith dashes his hat on table. Overwhelmed with reproaches, he puts it on again, and drinks out of bottle.

*The plot
thickens.*

Act II. Another Kamschatkan interior, home of wealthy tailor, richly furnished with tapestries representing allegorical birds with very long bills. Robert and friend and tailor's son shake hands. Friend tells anecdote of young man who was about to blow his brains out because he could not pay his tailor, but reflected in time that this was a very foolish thing. All laugh heartily. Wealthy tailor appears and says suspiciously, "Surely I have seen those dittos before?" Act III. Scene in first interior. Robert's father and village blacksmith with his hat still on, in suits of dittos exactly like those of friend. They shake hands, and make merry with

A QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA.

the bottle. Robert says, "Where did you get those dittos?" His sister confesses that she has been to a *conversazione* with the tailor's son. Robert stamps and punches his chest. He cries, "Take them off." Father refuses. Mother says, "What a fuss about a *conversazione*!" Village blacksmith has a pull at the bottle and says he will take anything off except his hat.

*Thrilling
dénouement.*

Act IV. Interior number two. Wealthy tailor examines his books and exclaims, "I knew it! Those dittos were never paid for." Robert and friend come on, Robert with large copy-book, friend with large cheque-book. Robert recites noble sentiments from the copy-book. Friend, who is a great traveller, describes how the custom of shaking hands varies throughout the globe. Wealthy tailor says archly, "Surely in your travels there is a trifling account for dittos you have overlooked." Friend gives him a cheque for an enormous amount, and wealthy tailor, overcome with emotion, wishes to shake hands, but the friend draws back and shakes his head. The play is called in the Kamschatkan language "Kum Grippelfingeroffschen — The Handshake."

*The musical
conductor.*

I was obliged to admit that the synopsis was not lucid, though I could

A QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA.

perceive in it some glimmering of a moral. The dramatic literature of Kamschatka is evidently didactic. I daresay our native stage will benefit considerably by this irruption of elevated ideas. Such a reflection had no consolation for my friend the dramatic critic ; but, for myself, when I go to a theatre where the play is not quite intelligible, there is alway the solace of studying the orchestra. I question whether this devoted body of public servants ever receives the attention it richly deserves. While the conductor, between the acts, is drawing exquisite harmonies from his musicians, the house is lost in small talk. Sometimes he shows the meekness of patient merit by waving his bâton mechanically, and gazing into space ; but I like him best when his soul awakens, and presses every muscle into the melodious service, indifferent to the callous frivolity of the chattering theatre.

*From St. Cecilia
to Arthur Roberts.* First he muses, as if the bars he is beating inspired him to reverent contemplation. Then he shakes his head, and flashes an inquiring glance at the first violins. They are playing very well, no doubt ; but is this the true exaltation of music ? No ; their souls must be uplifted—they must rise with his, and soar far above the proscenium. He grasps the air over his

A QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA.

head, as if he were climbing up the golden stair. But this mood does not last long: it is too ethereal; it might, if unduly prolonged, disembody him and carry his spirit to celestial regions. In an instant he drops to earth, and seems to be driving a hansom cab. The reins are held jauntily; he flicks the horse's head with the bâton; he cocks his eye at the distant drum, as if he saw a fare. From St. Cecilia he has come down to Arthur Roberts.

*A tribute to
friendship.*

Just then his gaze is caught by a friend in a box, and a flush of joyous recognition deepens on his brow. He looks at the orchestra again with mute but eloquent mandate. "How shall we most fittingly acknowledge," it says, "that there is, at all events, one person in the house who is interested in our noble efforts? Can we pass such a tribute by unnoticed? Would not that be a slur not only upon friendship, but also upon our glorious art? Never shall it be said, my friends, that we received this warm human greeting with icy scorn." So the first violins declaim with rapture, and fire comes into the eye of the clarionet, who is not usually emotional, and the oboe is quite red in the face, and the drum booms a majestic salute, and over all the conductor spreads his hands as though his

A QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA.

fingers were carolling and fiddling and drumming a melodious benison. Then as the great wave of triumphant harmony slowly subsides, his head droops, he seems to curl up on the last three bars, and, with the final glance of ineffable beatitude at the first violins out of the corner of his eye, he disappears into his waistcoat pocket like a precious instrument which must be carefully put away.

Choice entertainment for virgins.

A *matinée* audience at a French play in London is always an interesting study. There are very few men in the theatre; as a rule, we reserve our enjoyment of Gallic piquancy till after dinner. The stalls are occupied by women, highly respectable matrons and budding virgins; there are rows of *demoiselles à marier*, who follow without a tremor the edifying domestic drama of the French stage; and, between the acts, I hear some blameless collegian of Girton explaining to a less mature companion the exquisite complications which are yet to come. The other afternoon, among the treats in store, were the dance which is known in Paris as the *chahut*, and the sudden collapse of a very ardent love-scene with the intimation from the lady, who is breathless with flight round screens and tables, that she is the illegitimate daughter of the pursuing gallant's papa.

A QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA.

*Caution of Mr.
Redford.*

Such an entertainment is what you might call a pretty strong order for the *demoiselles à marier*. Perhaps it was of them the Examiner of Plays was thinking when he insisted on certain modifications in "Ma Cousine," though what those modifications were it is difficult to conjecture, unless the Examiner chastened the frolic in the screen scene. I can imagine Mr. Redford saying, with authority, "Whatever happens, no chairs must be overturned. I cannot allow the spectacle of a piece of furniture with its legs in the air to be presented to the innocent gaze of the *matinée* maidenhood."

*Pink (and other
shades) of im-
propriety.*

But the Examiner might have spared himself any moral anxiety and intellectual exertion. The *demoiselles à marier* would not have blenched at the upturned chair, for they received the *chahut* with equanimity, and at the climax of the screen-and-table tournament not one of them turned a hairpin. I need not explain to the sagacious reader that the *chahut* is that delightful evolution of elegance and refinement which he has doubtless admired at the Moulin Rouge. I will not say it is the pink of impropriety, for the colour varies; but theologians may speculate whether it would have shocked the daughter of Herodias; and if Colonel Newcome

A QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA.

were among us, I think that, in the interests of comparative decorum, he would prefer the *can-can*. Here the sagacious reader may welcome the opportunity for an essay on the distinction between the *can-can* and the *chahut*; but I shall gratify him only so far as to suggest that, while the *can-can* recalls the plantation ditty of the "Old blind hoss goin' to Jeroosalem"—

"Kicked so high,
Put him in a mooseum
Down in Alabama—

the *chahut* is less fitted for a "mooseum" than for that section of a costumier's premises which is known as the "trying-on department."

Fortitude of British maidens. This delicate *nuance*, however, did not flutter the *matinée* maidens. They watched the dance composedly, less with an air of sprightly interest than with a studious intensity. When the curtain came down on the revelation that the lady who had been skipping round what, in the furniture shops of Tottenham Court Road, they call a *suite*, was the gallant's sister, from which unexpected kinship he deduced a moral obligation to return to his wife, the students folded their programmes with a sigh of contentment, as if something attempted, something done, had earned a night's repose.

A QUAINTESS OF THE FOREIGN DRAMA.

A mystery. Even the most self-contained philosopher would be piqued by such a mystery. If "Ma Cousine" were done literally into English, if this new version of the assurance, "I will be a sister to you," familiar to rejected adorers, were sanctioned by the Examiner, *chahut* and all, I suppose the *matinée* virgins would be led out by indignant mammas in a procession of scandalised virtue ; or else such awful warnings from outraged parents would make lurid the columns of the *Times*, that the *demoiselles à marier* would be carefully secluded from the contamination. There are cynics, no doubt, who will affirm that it would need only a few protesting letters from paterfamilias to fill the stalls ; but I cling to the old-fashioned belief that the humours of Meilhac, in the plainest English, would be severely proscribed by Bayswater and Clapham.

The chahut as an idiom. What, then, is attractive in French for the mothers and daughters of those haunts of wisdom ? I surmise that it is a holy passion for a colloquial intimacy with the French tongue, a passion which purges the Parisian drama of all its earthiness, distilling the pure spirit of idiom. Viewed in this engaging light, the *chahut* is not risky ; it is idiomatic. When the *demoiselles à marier* listen to the dialogue in the screen scene,

SOME EXPERIENCES OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

it is of the astonishing combinations of *pouvoir* and *falloir* they are thinking, and not of the wicked father whom Riquette suddenly poses as a moral barrier betwixt herself and the amorous Baron. Bless you ! for the studious mind there is nothing irregular in Meilhac except his verbs ; and the doves of Bayswater and Clapham fly home with their pretty beaks full of choice Parisian phrases, which will embellish the domestic nest.

SOME EXPERIENCES OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

My first photograph. I HAVE always envied people who can be photographed every week without turning a hair. Not for them that freezing moment when you take a last look in the glass—a strange glass, too, much less sympathetic than the domestic mirror which has fondly reflected for years your grimaces in shaving ; not for them, I say, that sinking which comes to some of us just before we seek the bubble reputation at the camera's mouth. Perhaps I have this feeling because I remember my first photograph as a

SOME EXPERIENCES OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

painful disclosure, which caused so disagreeable a stir that the parents and guardians remonstrated with the photographer. Why had he made me look like that? Why had he exposed me to the gibes of contemporaries, who amused themselves with a sort of game which they called catching my expression? Whenever I appeared in society, the first face turned my way instantly took on a heavy scowl which ran round the company like an epidemic. It was not to be endured, said the parents and guardians, instructed by my vehement protests, that a young life should be blighted by such a libel.

*Nature had
given me
a ——!*

Well, the photographer was a straightforward man, not without humour, and having explained in technical terms that no imp of caricature was hidden in the camera, he patted me on the head, and said, "You see, a boy of his age is often like that. Mind, I don't say he won't grow out of it, though"—this with a thoughtful frown—"Nature has given him a ——." The parents and guardians stared at me as if I were a suddenly revealed monstrosity; and I suppose the particular freak which Nature had wrought upon my innocent features must have been glaring at that moment, for we all went sadly home.

SOME EXPERIENCES OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

Art on tin.

Years passed before I again mustered nerve to meet the photographer's eye. This time he was an artist in tin-ware ; that is to say, he transferred the image of a bashful public to that metal ; and he employed a specious orator to stand in his doorway, and proclaim the virtues of this process. When he saw me, the orator seemed to be struck dumb with wonder. Did he, too, notice that Nature had given me a —— ? No ; he laid an insinuating hand upon my arm, and begged me, with the deepest earnestness, not to lose such an opportunity of niching myself among the pictured immortals. He even accompanied me upstairs to the studio, and pointed out to the photographer that a young man with my impressive air of persuasion and command ought to be represented with folded arms, leaning on the back of a high chair, as one who stands at the helm of State and gazes tranquilly at the troublous ocean of affairs. O that tin trophy of predestined fame ! Out of a nocturnal gloom rose a dim figure of gigantic height, like one of those graven images which keep grim watch on the dizzy parapets of old cathedrals. I have never seen the gargoyles of Notre Dame without thinking of that photograph !

*Compensations
of ugliness.*

There was another long interval before I was so far reassured as to

SOME EXPERIENCES OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

fancy that the kindly hand of Time had effaced, or, at least, disguised, my physiognomical heritage. During that period, friends were obliging enough to say that they pined for my portrait. It is lucky that, in our social intercourse, the 'haviour of the visage, as Hamlet calls it, beguiles the tolerant eye. A changeful ugliness becomes quite sparkling ; you might almost distract attention from the absence of a nose by the dazzling evolutions of a good set of teeth. To the portrait-painter you can talk as you sit, so that he may seize your most engaging expression ; but to the photographer you must, at the crisis, be as dumb as the proverbial man at the wheel. To unfold to the camera the rapid panorama of your facial graces is to spoil the plate and put the operator out of temper. There is nothing for it, during the century or so which is pleasantly called the "exposure," but to summon before your mind's eye visions which may suffuse your visage with a mellow radiance.

*The critical
moment.*

Think of your most triumphant moments, of hated rivals abashed before your victorious calm, of that long *tête-à-tête* in the dimmest corner of the conservatory ; or let imagination call up obeisant publishers proffering big cheques on richly embroidered cushions, while fellow-townsmen gild your merits with a service of

SOME EXPERIENCES OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

gold plate, and the *Times* announces that your "Ode to a Cockleshell" has determined a wavering Prime Minister to crown your brow with the national laurel. I thought of these things when I came before the chemical inquisitor for the third time. I thought that the light of transfiguration on my features was succeeded by a look of infinite peace. Does not Austin Dobson sing?—

" Sometimes the finely frenzied eye
Remains quiescent in its orbit."

And yet, when the photograph appeared, there was a baleful glitter in the right eyeball, and I was again reminded that Nature had afflicted me with a ——!

The offended Mahatma. After this disaster, I spent years in regarding photography as a spirit of malevolence, the agent of some offended Mahatma, who pursued me with insatiable vengeance. To others he was kind enough; their portraits cumbered mantelpieces and reared themselves with statuesque insolence on pianos. There is a kind of man who always has a new photograph, like a professional beauty. He advertises himself in drawing-rooms, usually in evening-dress and a white waistcoat. By multiplying his effigy in

SOME EXPERIENCES OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

this fashion, that kind of man is a perpetual new-comer, who takes the bloom off your afternoon call. I suffered this till last week, when I took a desperate resolution, and stole timidly into a studio on one of those days of our winter which are consecrated to the absent sun. By way of appearing at ease, I remarked to the eminent firm of photographers that it was dull weather for their business. With the slightest shade of reproof, the eminent firm replied that they used the electric light. Good heavens! I was so far behind science as not to know that. And suppose a piercing electric beam, directed by the Mahatma (unless, peradventure, he were sleeping), should illuminate that particular infirmity which had hitherto been my doom!

*A benevolent
operator.*

But as soon as I saw the operator, I felt that here was a true physiognomist, a perfect Lavater, who perceived at once the plight of the trembling subject, and brought a benevolent genius to the rescue. His look said plainly, "Ah! I see that Nature has handicapped you with a ——. My dear sir, do not let it trouble you. By a delicate adjustment of your not wholly impossible head, we shall bring out the full nobility of the torso. But, to show you the consummate nicety of the thing, we will begin with a

SOME EXPERIENCES OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

few commonplace positions, gradually shading off—out-manœuvring, so to speak—that annoying trick of Nature which, I notice from the furrows in your brow, has worried you all your life. Eyes a little more this way ; thank you. Now blink as much as you please.”

The Lavater of the studio. To that magician I offer the fleeting monument of this page. He has changed the world for me, arrested misanthropy, and softened the decrees of heredity. With an excess of sympathy he has thrown into the series of photographs an Adonis of five-and-twenty, in whom my dearest friend fails to detect any trace of my lineaments ; but the delicately adjusted head is a masterpiece of discretion. I propose to stand upon that head, jealous no more of white waistcoats. But in how many deceptions has photography played a gracious or a lurid part ! Some of us are a little weary of detective stories ; why does not the Lavater of the photographic studio give a fillip to a jaded curiosity by writing his reminiscences ? What character, what adventure, must have come within his ken !

The mystery of Jones. I once had a friend whom I visited at long intervals. Every time I noticed on his mantelpiece a fresh set of photo-

SOME EXPERIENCES OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

graphs of fair women, some of them with decorously tender inscriptions, "Jones," I invariably said, "I suspect you more and more of being a dog"; and he invariably met this challenge with an evasive laugh, as of one who could, and he would, unfold a thrilling tale. The truth was that never did man suggest the ideal dog less than Jones. He was small and nervous, always ill at ease in the presence of lovely woman, whom he regarded submissively with a fetch-and-carry air. And yet there was that ever-changing show of photographs! Could he have some secret fascination which was not revealed to the ordinary observer? Or was he the object of one of lovely woman's inexplicable aberrations?

*Sorrows of a
cavetaker.*

But one day I called unexpectedly, and found the mantelpiece bare of its customary ornaments, and Jones, with a distracted aspect, writing a letter which evidently cost him a painful effort.

"Gracious powers!" I exclaimed, "what has happened? Why aren't you a dog to-day? Or have the fickle charmers left you for another?"

"My young woman and her mother have been here," groaned Jones; "I wasn't in, so they left this letter." I took up the document, and found it conceived in the fieriest maternal vein. All was

SOME EXPERIENCES OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

over, wrote the indignant mother, between her daughter and an abandoned profligate. At last his real character was known ; those shameless pictures had revealed him as he was. Had she not called that day, her innocent child might have been confided to a libertine's arms. A merciful Providence had guided her to the spot, and she had taken away the photographs as enduring evidences of a life of infamy.

"Phew !" I said, "this is hard ; but if you *will* be a dog——"

"I am not !" cried Jones, starting up ; "the photographs are not mine."

"What ! You ask me to believe that those endearing greetings were not addressed to your irresistible personality ?"

"I swear it," he answered solemnly. "I took charge of them for other fellows who were passing through town. They said I was a sober and trustworthy custodian for a collection of pictures unsuitable for a provincial tour."

"And you are writing this obviously reasonable explanation to mamma ?"

"Yes," said Jones ruefully. "Do you think she'll believe it ?"

I assured him that *I* believed it ; but somehow that seemed to be scanty comfort.

ON CHRISTMAS NUMBERS.

The ghost season. JUST about this time I usually begin to feel my Christmas Number appetite sharpening. When I look in upon editors, they are scarcely visible for piles of fantasy, hot from the printers, and heaps of pictures, all consecrated to the monumental effort which is made at this season to hypnotise the public with lurid imaginings. As a rule, I swallow all the Christmas Numbers with voracity, gobbling up ghosts till I have a surfeit which has to be relieved by doses of serious literature at bedtime. But just now, for some mysterious reason, I am "off my feed," as the ostlers say. Ghost, roast or boiled, ghost on the side-board, ghost in a *pâté*—none of these delicacies attracts me. I dreamt last night that the waiter at the club greeted me with "Ghost is off, but there's a nice *salmi* of bigamy just up"; to which I returned the inconsequent reply, "No, thanks. I lunched to-day off cold forgery and pickles."

"Bile, dear boy!" What do these strange symptoms portend? I mentioned to a friend the curious fact that something had gone wrong with my customary appetite for Christmas Numbers, and he promptly said, "Bile, dear boy. You haven't written anything gruesomely appropriate

ON CHRISTMAS NUMBERS.

to the festive season, and so suppressed murder and other devilments are squirming in your mind." There is a scientific plausibility about this view of my "innerds" (I have to thank the pig-stickers in "Jude the Obscure" for that expressive word); I feel there is a suppressed something which ought properly to have been enshrined in a Christmas Number. Perhaps, if I get it off my mind now, I may be able to tackle the ghost-stories with the wonted relish.

Morpen's nose. The misadventure of Morpen's nose was long believed by some of his acquaintance to be a tale of *diablerie*. How were they to account for the sudden appearance of two brilliant scars, one on each nostril, looking as if a pair of pincers, red-hot from some diabolical furnace, had clipped him, just as St. Dunstan is said to have clipped the Evil One, in the course of a stormy interview? The Evil One may have nursed his revenge for centuries, until he had this opportunity of gratifying it, though, as there was nothing of St. Dunstan about Morpen, this fashion of paying off an old score seemed to argue an imperfect sense of justice in the infernal regions. Here was a mild and inoffensive stockbroker, who had retired to his room in a country house to dress for dinner, and who was presently heard howling

ON CHRISTMAS NUMBERS.

with anguish. When several men rushed to his aid, he was found in the dark with his head in a basin of water, from which issued the spluttering explanation that he had tripped on the carpet and fallen with his face on the lighted candle. This sounded well enough at the moment ; but when it was remarked later that the marks of burning were neatly adjusted on either side of his nose, the candle theory was discountenanced.

Strange behaviour of tongs. Pressed for a further statement, Morpen became extremely mysterious, stared at the ladies as if he had some revelation which might terrify them, and then told us, with much hesitation, a singular story. He had not been two minutes in his room, he said, when the candle was suddenly extinguished, and, at the same moment, a kind of luminous mist, of a bluish tint, appeared in the empty fireplace. "I was not in the least afraid," he continued ; "and the first idea that occurred to me was that here might be an excellent find for the Psychical Research Society. So I went down on my hands and knees, and cautiously bent over the fender to examine the phenomenon more closely. Just then the tongs became incandescent, and flew up in my face, nipping me by the nose ; and I gave the yell that you fellows heard."

ON CHRISTMAS NUMBERS.

*Striking candour
of Morpen.*

Our first impulse was one of incredulity.

“Why tell us that taradiddle about the candle?” asked a man in the company, bluntly.

“My dear boy,” said Morpen, “the actual fact seemed so incredible to myself that, on the instant, I simply could not relate it. But, as you say, no candle could have made these particular scars. Then what *did* make them?”

I remembered afterwards that, while he spoke, Morpen’s eyes were fixed in a strange way on one of the ladies, who was much agitated. She was a new visitor, who had arrived that day, a charming girl, with lovely brown hair, which curled freely all over her head.

“Oh, don’t say the house is haunted!” she exclaimed, turning to the host in a pretty, appealing way, though she seemed to be suppressing hysterical laughter with great difficulty.

“Haunted!” said the host, uneasily. “Well, there are always legends about an old place like this; but this is the first I have heard of a ghost with a pair of fiery tongs.”

*“Julia” takes
up the tongs story.*

The puzzle grew greater. We examined the fire-irons in Morpen’s room, but the tongs showed no trace of any recent glow. Still, there was his story, which he repeated

ON CHRISTMAS NUMBERS.

with increasing confidence ; and the suggestion that it should be submitted to the Psychical Research Society was unanimously approved. Some of the keenest inquirers of that important body took up the case, which is described in great detail, I believe, in the Society's "Transactions" ; and Mr. Stead, with the assistance of "Julia," broached the theory of St. Dunstan in the pages of *Borderland*.

The confession. I lost sight of Morpen for some little time ; and when we met again he was much elated over his approaching marriage.

"You would never guess who the lady is," he said. "Don't you remember the devil and the tongs ? "

"You have the scars still," I replied ; "but I presume you are not going to marry the ghostly visitant who gave them to you ? "

"Oh yes, I am," said Morpen, with a great laugh. "You may well look bewildered, dear boy. I tell you that the hand which marked me for life is to be mine by the holy law of matrimony. I bamboozled you all beautifully that night, and so I don't mind letting you into the secret now. You recollect that there was no gas in the bedrooms of that house ; but there was gas in the corridor. Well, that evening, when I went up to dress, I

ON CHRISTMAS NUMBERS.

hadn't been in the room a moment, when I noticed, through the glazed panel above the door, that the gas in the corridor was blinking in a curious way. I opened the door very quietly, and, peeping out, saw a girl with her back to me heating a pair of curling-tongs in the flame just above her head. I thought this a good opportunity for a mild sort of joke ; so I crept along the passage—she was only three yards off — and said Boh ! just behind her.

" Pretty psychical researchers ! " She turned in an instant, and gripped my nose with those infernal pincers ! Then she whipped into her room, and I whipped into mine ; but why you beggars never noticed that my howl of agony came from the corridor I couldn't understand. You were pretty psychical researchers, the whole lot of you ! "

" But the lady ! Don't tell me it was the girl with the lovely brown hair that curled so freely ? "

" It was ! She was a little trump not to peach on me ; but, then, " he added, with a sly twinkle, " you see, the hair didn't curl so freely after all : it had to be helped by science ; and, as she didn't want to let this out before the whole crowd, we made a kind of tacit treaty. She spoke the language of the eye with such eloquence, by George ! that I saw it at once. "

ON CHRISTMAS NUMBERS.

“So, now you are the captive of her curling-tongs, she doesn’t mind the story being known?”

“Not she! Why, we sent it to the Psychical Research Society in the form of a penitent confession, and they wrote a very tart letter, to say that some of their professors were strongly disposed to believe I had told the truth at first, and was now resorting to deception!”

*A sad young
editor.*

I once wrote for a Christmas Number a story which was designed to treat our annual carnival from a philosophical standpoint. All went well with the hero and heroine; their troth was plighted; parents and guardians and banking accounts made a chorus of approval; the course of true love had not a wrinkle. But one midsummer day the hero was greatly preoccupied. He was an editor, and the shadow of a Christmas Number had fallen on his soul.

“How delightful!” exclaimed his affianced, when she learned the subject of his thoughts. “Of course you will write a story, a real Christmas story for the Number, and after dinner on Christmas Day you will read it to us all by the fire before the lamps are lighted, and I shall sit near you and wonder whether the ghosts will really come, because *your* ghosts, dearest, will seem quite, *quite* real.”

ON CHRISTMAS NUMBERS.

A stricken conscience.

They were walking in a beautiful glade, and as there was nobody in sight, she leaned her fair young head upon his shoulder. But putting her aside somewhat roughly, he took six hasty strides, like Eugene Aram, and thus addressed her astonished ear :

“Emmeline, this is the moment that I have dreaded long. I should have spoken of this before our engagement, but I was a coward”—he smote his brow—“and I feared to lose you.”

“What can you mean ?” she gasped.

Dyspepsia's victim.

“I have kept it from you—may I be forgiven !—but now you must know that I suffer from”—his voice fell to a whisper—“the black heritage of dyspepsia ! My father and grandfather wrote tales of Christmas feasting and junketing, and lived up to them ! Before you stands a miserable man to whom a family dinner on Christmas Day is a dream of horror. As I look at you I see the hideous sausage coiling round your neck, and the blue flame of snapdragon in your eye. Ah !”

Emmeline is relentless.

He sank to the ground and buried his face in his hands. But she was cold and stern.

“Ernest,” she said, calmly, “this is a very bad

ON CHRISTMAS NUMBERS.

case of heredity, and heredity is quite incompatible with our romance. I have been brought up on the family dinner and the Yule-tide log, and to abandon them would be to abandon the safeguards of domestic life, and let in anarchy."

"Enough," he cried. "Let us part. We are the victims of the great war between the new philosophy and the old beliefs. Farewell! And when you sit among your aunts and pull the Tom Smith cracker——"

*A tragic
Christmas.*

But his emotion choked his utterance, and he fled. How did they spend their Christmas Day? In a lonely attic, over a rasher of bacon and one small coal (Wallsend was then five pounds a hundredweight), shivered a man of careworn but determined aspect, a volume of Schopenhauer in his hand, and another of Hegel on his knee. In a comfortably furnished room, surrounded by mature but sparkling spinsters, in one hand an orange, in the other a glass of port (oranges and port always followed the mid-day turkey and the five o'clock jam on the great festival day in that circle), sat Emmeline with a hectic flush and a quivering lip. Presently the spinster aunts looked at her and said, "My dear, you have not asked us your riddle." She knew that to them Christmas

THE PERILS OF AN AMATEUR ACTOR.

would not be Christmas without the conundrum she had put every year ever since she could lisp. She made a brave effort—"Why is a bald head like heav—?"—but it was too much, and she swooned away.

5

ON THE PERILS OF AN AMATEUR ACTOR.

*The Back
Drawing-room
Drama.*

THERE is a popular actor whom I never see without recalling the days when we played in private theatricals together with immense gravity. Some of his friends suspect me of jealousy, for when they invite me to express admiration of his undoubted gifts, I often reply, in pensive abstraction, "Ah! you should have seen him as an amateur." The truth is that as soon as he sets foot upon the stage, I am promptly carried back to our exits and our entrances in the back drawing-room, where it was difficult to get on or off without crumpling up landscapes and bringing whole castles about our ears.

*Damon and
Pythias.*

We were the best of friends in those happy times, when our cheeks were "partially obscured by whisker," not sacrificed on

THE PERILS OF AN AMATEUR ACTOR.

the altar of art, but carefully veiled on occasion by layers of grease-paste. Ambition had laid an imperative summons on us both, without causing any collision of temperaments ; for he was a sentimental hero, while I contributed a gaunt figure and lugubrious countenance to the service of low comedy. Perhaps you never saw my Perkin Middlewick, suitably enlarged by pillows, which had an uneasy habit of wandering round to the back. Mr. Bunter, too, was one of my great parts. You do not get such acting now, for, of course, I am speaking of the palmy days of the amateur stage.

*Sad fate of a
physician.*

Well, all went fraternally till a certain lady of our acquaintance wrote a play. She was an arbitrary only daughter, and her father, a distinguished physician, resigned himself to misery, while she turned his house upside down. She had not only written the play : she painted the scenery, designed the footlights, and hammered the stage with her own fair hands, at a ruinous cost in nails. The wretched physician could not walk upstairs without stumbling over lamps and cans of paint ; if he opened a door unexpectedly, fragments of wood fell on his head like a booby-trap ; at meals he listened to jargon about “flies” and “wings,” till he asked, with inopportune satire, whether the

THE PERILS OF AN AMATEUR ACTOR.

great enterprise had something to do with entomology. Eventually he took refuge in his consulting-room, where he slept on a camp-bedstead, and complained that the servants brought him pots of rouge when he wanted soup. I was told that his patients, at this time, were much disturbed by his distraught appearance, and that they usually called for the purpose of giving him medical advice. During rehearsals the servants listened at the door, and carried scraps of the dialogue to the kitchen, where the phrases of the sixteenth century, to which period the play belonged, turned the heads of the butler and the coachman, who had frequent altercations about the meaning of "By my hali-dame," which, the coachman said, was a horse.

A Transformation.

Now my friend, the popular actor, had been cast for the sentimental hero, and I was to impersonate a comic servitor who had to overhear the villain plotting the abduction of the heroine. But the hero, somewhat irritably, suggested that this was not romantic, and that he ought to come upon the villain by accident, and there and then put him to the sword. This was the first rift between Damon and Pythias. Next day I received a note from the arbitrary only daughter, telling me that the villain was down with chicken-pox, that the substitute she had

THE PERILS OF AN AMATEUR ACTOR.

chosen refused, with disgusting selfishness, to give up a ball on the night of the performance, and that I must come to the next rehearsal with the villainy letter-perfect. A glow of triumph ran through my soul. Damon was in the sulks, was he? He should see that Pythias could meet him on his own ground. Farewell, low comedy, the merry jest, the guttural chuckle, the slightly inflamed nose, the resounding slap of the thigh, all those subtle characteristics which had made my comic servitor the joy of true connoisseurs of amateur dramatic art! Come, genius of romance; envelop me here with the atmosphere of elegant iniquity, curve my nostrils with horrid scorn, and touch the outer corner of the sinister eye with the gleam of diabolical purpose!

*Virtue of an
Auburn Wig.* Straightway I bethought me of a wig with auburn curls. This villain must be a cavalier of fascinating manners and sumptuous aspect; no scowling ruffian for me, but a polished desperado who would be Damon's equal in good looks and his superior in distinction. At the next rehearsal he did not appear; there was a letter of excuses, pleading a particular engagement to see a billiard match, and sending ironical compliments to the new low-comedy representative of treasons, stratagems, and spoils.

THE PERILS OF AN AMATEUR ACTOR.

“Wants to back out of it!” said the arbitrary only daughter, with a flashing eye; and we spent the rest of the evening in concocting a retaliation which should ruin the offender in the esteem of amateur playgoers, a penalty so awful that the horror of it was not eclipsed even by a sudden doubt as to the capacity of the stage to hold up more than two people at once.

*Damon is
suspicious.*

When the night of the performance came, Damon, who arrived late, found Pythias resplendent in the rich auburn wig, and a costume of blue and silver.

“You are not going on like that!” he growled.

“And why not, pray?”

“Confound it, man, your wig is exactly like mine!”

“Keep your head on; we shall not be mistaken for each other.”

“No,” he retorted; “but everybody will think the funny man has stolen some one’s clothes for a joke.”

*Thrust and
Parry.*

Why did that possibility thrust me into the clutches of misgiving? As I caught my reflection in the glass, why did I look like Mr. Bunter at a fancy-dress ball? Then it struck me more forcibly than before that my most

THE PERILS OF AN AMATEUR ACTOR.

effective entrance was a dangerous business. The villain was supposed to scale the heroine's balcony, where he was met by the hero, sword in hand. There was no balcony, only a piece of wood just high enough to conceal my head as I lay at full length on the boards. The cue! why didn't he give the cue?

A horrid misunderstanding. Suddenly he exclaimed, "'Tis the villain's hour. Even now he climbs the giddy height to this window, where he shall meet, not the prize he covets with his black heart, but retribution and death!" Then he gave one end of the balcony a violent kick: it flew aside, and disclosed me to the audience on my hands and knees. Never shall I forget the yell of delight that went up from the excited house. In the earlier scenes I had been received with a kind of puzzled wonder; but now the sight of the low comedian in borrowed plumes on all-fours cleared up the mystery. Vainly I struggled to maintain a deadly and distinguished calm; the audience roared all the more. "Splendid!" whispered Damon. "Quite your old form, dear boy!" O Art, implacable mistress, hadst thou sustained me in that trial, I might not have stooped to tickle a herd who insisted that motley, even in blue and silver, was my only wear! And what a pang when

THE ONLY MAN IN TOWN.

the arbitrary only daughter, radiant with successful authorship, complimented my performance, which was "just like me," and the distinguished physician wagged his head in a knowing manner, and said, "Some of them didn't quite see what you were driving at, you know ; but, bless you, *I* knew it was the art that conceals art ! "

THE ONLY MAN IN TOWN.

Alone in London. THERE is a man in Maupassant who is haunted by the nocturnal desolation of Paris. He dines and takes a cheery walk : the boulevard is deserted ; he turns down one street and up another : they are empty ; he explores this quarter and that : there is no sign of life ; he knocks wildly at doors without response : the whole city is void of humanity except for a solitary maniac. Now, at this moment, I am the Only Man in Town ; but the solitude does not affect me disagreeably. I know I am alone, because there isn't a cabman to chaffer over a fare, and there isn't an actor outside of Gatti's. What has become of the population I cannot say, unless they have vanished in some revolutionary scrimmage. There

THE ONLY MAN IN TOWN.

are signs of barricades here and there : opposite the Reform Club, for instance, the whole roadway is up.

*How the Reform
Club fought for
liberty.*

It must have been a desperate situation which drew the Reformers into the fray. I can picture them, stout clubmen in white waistcoats, with a broad sash round the capacious middle, and the smoking-cap of liberty on the shining poll. They are terrible fellows when they are roused. Ah, there's a swashing blow ! A monumental Tory is prostrate on the steps of the Carlton ; a chunk of young wood pavement took him in the abdomen ! Black balls rattle like hail on the windows opposite ; a saucepan, deftly aimed by a member of the Carlton kitchen committee, has bonneted Sir Lewis Morris, who was just bursting into a victorious ode ! The whole scene lives before me ; but where are the actors ? Have the dead buried their dead in the cellars, and coffined them in bins of '74 champagne ?

*A question of
costume.*

What is the most appropriate costume for the Only Man in Town ? When the eye of society is upon you, of course, you wear the regulation dress, the severe frock-coat, the moderately debonair trousers, the boots

THE ONLY MAN IN TOWN.

which reflect in a glossy surface the best of all possible worlds, the hat which is a monument of respectability. But such an attire in a desert is absurd : so I go home and take down one of the forty-five straw hats which hang on silver pegs ; and out of a wardrobe, which occupies six rooms and a corridor, I select a suit of spotless nankeen, and from a reservoir of leather a pair of auburn shoes. In Paris, I see, they have been discussing the question whether spats should be worn with evening dress ; it might as well be argued that the polka should be danced on all-fours. Really, you may carry the eternal incongruities too far ; but no such reproach can be applied to my garb.

*The Last
Minstrel.*

I have not sat in a chair in the park three minutes when there is a strange sound behind me ; 'twas but the wind ; no, it is a chuckle, a human chuckle. I turn, and behold the Last Minstrel, in nankeen, with stripes, a banjo in his hand, and the native hue of his cheek hidden beneath the layer of customary black. I have always thought that Christy minstrels cork their faces to conceal the ravages of cynicism ; they have been buffeted against the world's indifference to song and dance, till they need a mask to hide their contempt.

THE ONLY MAN IN TOWN.

The dignity of a THE LAST MINSTREL. Morning.
"Christy."

May I make so bold as to say you are one of us? Fellow-sufferer, what a sight is this! (*He strikes a melancholy chord on the banjo.*) Here, take the instrument, and sing to me "The Swannie River"—I haven't the heart.

MYSELF. I am the Only Man in Town. As a spurious negro, you don't count.

THE LAST MINSTREL (*with a horrid crash of catgut*). What? Not a man and a brother?

MYSELF. No, sir. I am acquainted with the real negro. He is a waiter in Chicago; he used to wait on me in large white mittens, which crossed my nose when he wanted something on the table. He was fond of standing in a doorway in a dignified attitude, with a small hand-mirror, in which he contemplated his personal beauty. You are not like him at all.

THE LAST MINSTREL. Mighty particular to a mitten, ain't you? What's the difference, I should like to know? I went into the nigger business when I was a kid. For twenty years I've been a gentleman of colour; never washed it off, even on my wedding-day. (*Sings to a plaintive air.*)

*Ho, ho! such a change in Joe,
As a chickabiddy he was pink;
But alas! and alack!
He's turned black,
And his golden hair is streaming down like ink!*

THE ONLY MAN IN TOWN.

If it comes to that, you're a regular Christy yourself, barring the cork. Where did you get those slops?

MYSELF. Slops, sir! This elegant suit is from my private wardrobe, which occupies six rooms and a corridor.

THE LAST MINSTREL. Hoop! I can stick all mine into the old bandanna. (*Sings with much sentiment.*)

*Blue, blue, I love you—
I love you, I do!
With lots
Of spots
As yellow as the cornfield;
Green, green, green to mē,
And every blazing hue,
My old bandanna, old bandanna, old bandanna true!*

MYSELF. Strange conjunction—the Only Man in Town and the Sham Darkie, alone amid the desolation of Babylon!

THE LAST MINSTREL. Chuck it, old man, and let's go to Margate. I'll give you a song that'll be the making of you at the halls. (*Sings with great spirit.*)

*Some parties close their houses, but that's a bloomin' blind,
For tho' they put the shutters up, they're poppin' corks behind!
That I can spot the game, boys, I'll bet you all a crown,
For I'm the Man in Town, boys, the Only Man in Town!*

Chorus, gentlemen, *if* you please!

THE ONLY MAN IN TOWN.

*Some are at the sea-side, a-gettin' very brown,
Some are on the moors, boys, a-bringin' feathers down ;
But I am on the job, boys, as jolly as a clown,
For I am the Man in Town, boys, the Only Man in Town !*

*A missing port-
manteau.*

Some years ago, I made a little expedition in Switzerland. I posted a portmanteau at Spiez, on the Lake of Thun, and walked over the Gemmi to Zermatt. The Swiss postal authorities became deeply attached to that portmanteau, and could not bring themselves to part with it for ten days. Meanwhile, I was dressed in flannels, and dependent on the charity of strangers at the hotel for an occasional shirt, pair of socks, and what not. By the tenth day matters were serious. I made an excursion to the Théodule hut, in company with a fair mountaineer, and a friend of mine who has since attained magisterial renown, and who belongs to that distinguished band of public servants of whom Hamlet says so appreciatively, "Give me the Recorders." Well, I had forgotten to have my shoes nailed, and in a slippery place on a narrow path, with an ice-slope on one side, leading to a beautiful, cool, deep pool, and a snow-hill on the other, I lost my footing, and was saved by the sinewy hand of the fair mountaineer, who clutched my collar in the nick of time. How she laughed ! How the Recorder (in chrysalis) laughed ! If this should meet his

THE ONLY MAN IN TOWN.

eye, I hope it will bring a retrospective smile to the Bench, and soften the severity of justice towards some hapless culprit.

*Awful scenes in a
Swiss hotel.*

On the way back, tempted by a short cut, I glissaded down a grass slope, unmindful of the adhesiveness of verdure to flannel. How the hotel laughed! Here and there, I thought a face was clouded. Men who had lent the occasional shirt, pair of socks, and what not, seemed rather dubious and abstracted when I described the day's adventures, especially the timely adroitness of the fair mountaineer. Were they thinking they would never see the what not again, and that they would have had some slight satisfaction had it gone with me to the bottom of the cool, deep pool? It was a critical moment. To walk about a Swiss hotel, keeping your back as close as possible to friendly walls and pieces of furniture, and feeling that half the company suspect you to be an impostor, whose missing portmanteau is a myth, and who has spoiled confiding strangers of their what not: this, I say, is an experience that might shake the stoutest nerve.

*In the nick of
time.*

How could I go down to dinner in verdure clad? How could I borrow more garments from neighbours who showed so

THE ONLY MAN IN TOWN.

plainly that they never expected to see their what not any more ? As I sat on my bed in despair, there was a knock at my door, and lo ! the port-manteau ! I fell upon it with delirious joy, tipping the porter beyond the dreams of avarice. When I appeared in the dining-room, radiant in a fresh suit, there was a moment's stupefaction, and then a burst of applause. Remorse seized the incredulous, and they sought to atone for unfounded suspicion by offering more what not, that I no longer needed.

*Criminal
infants.*

But, although I am the Only Man in Town, I find there are still children left in St. James's Park. They are small marauders, prompted, I fear, by pernicious fiction to illicit daring. Though fishing in the lake is strictly forbidden, these youthful law-breakers lurk on the shores with rod and line, and land the quarter-ounce stickleback, the largest fish known in these waters. Something in my aspect must inspire confidence, for when I came upon a party engaged in this nefarious pursuit, they smiled on the Only Man in Town ; and a little girl, who lived at Stratford, which, she assured me, was not Stratford-on-Avon, explained the dreadful business to me, while her brother and his mate were luring the stickleback from his fathomless lair.

THE ONLY MAN IN TOWN.

"You must know this is very wrong, my child," I said, paternally.

"Awful," said she; "but we likes stittlebats, does me and Joe and Billy Simpson. It's bad when you get caught by the beadle, though. He locks you up all night."

"And how do you catch the stittlebat?" I asked.

"Don't ye know? My!" She was amazed at my innocence. "A big brace button at the end of a string and a lot of worms on it. It ought to be a very big brace button," she added with emphasis. "Joe and Billy have only got little 'uns." There was a pause, and I wondered whether a button in my possession was considered desirable for this illegal industry. Should I encourage crime? Should I, too, defy the laws of my country? Happily, I was saved from the dilemma, for a stately official form appeared on the horizon, and with a cry of "You Billy!" my small temptress swooped upon her two companions, and vanished from my sight.

AN OLD PLAYGOER.

*Reminiscence of
a Troubadour.* I AM slowly recovering from the effects of a secret orgie. Last week I had a Birthday. Hitherto, that anniversary has excited no particular commotion in this bosom, though I can recall the birthdays of others which have fluttered its inmost recesses. Ah, Selina ! that birthday-party to which I was not invited still rankles in my memory ! It was a bitter night in January when the form of a despondent Troubadour might have been seen plodding through the snow to Selina's portal. There was revelry within ; shadows interlaced in the dance hovered on the blind ; the Troubadour could hear Selina's voice rippling in the flow of gaiety ; alack ! she had no thought of him. He rang the bell, handed a missive to the domestic, and impressed his melancholy isolation upon her by a hollow cough. The missive contained a birthday ode, an arrow of melodious reproach, which was to transfix the breast of the giddy and heedless fair. The Troubadour waited shivering in the lane ; perhaps he thought the ode would upset the entertainment, that Selina's remorse would quench the lights, and hang like lead on the flying feet. No such catastrophe rejoiced him ; on went the dance, and joy was unconfined. The

AN OLD PLAYGOER.

Troubadour trudged gloomily homeward, with grave doubts about the magic of poesy.

*An antique
sun-dial.*

The Birthday last week was quite a different affair. As the fateful date approached, I cherished the hope that none of my friends would mention it. There comes a time in your life when you begin to feel like an antique sun-dial, on which the declining orb casts a distressful shade. People look at you as who should say, "What's o'clock! Dear me, it's growing late!" This aspect of the Birthday was so strong upon me that I stayed indoors, and strove to renew the springs of a lost youth by dwelling on the adventures of adolescence. Suddenly the door burst open, and the room was filled with strange shapes, which, in an unaccountable way, seemed familiar. Some were merry, and talked without ceasing; some were moody, and struck tragic attitudes in corners; there was a gentleman, in his shirt, with his neck bare, who lifted his eyes to heaven, and appeared to be standing on the shadowy outline of a scaffold; a lady, of an Oriental type of beauty, whose rich proportions were set off by—well, by tights, led a chorus, in which I could distinguish nothing but "Vasco di Gama," the name, I believe, of a celebrated traveller; then another voice broke into a refrain which sounded like—

AN OLD PLAYGOER.

Glasses round, cigars as well.
Tommy Dod, Tommy Dod !

This was interrupted by a wave of boyish trebles with—

Spring, Spring, beautiful Spring,
Loveliest season of all the ye-ar !

The last syllable went up abruptly, with a shrill accent that pleasantly suggested the nipping shrewdness of our English April.

"Many happy returns." What did it all mean ? That jockey who had explained how some melodramatic villain had tried to "nobble" the favourite ; that sprightly damsel who warbled the assurance that the "O.K. thing on Sunday is walking in the Zoo" ; that reformed dipsomaniac, rejoicing because he had broken through a wall in a tunnel of the Underground, and picked the drugged hero off the rails just in the nick of time, before the passing of a train ; where had I met them all ? Presently, there was a hush ; all eyes were fixed on me ; and then, with hands extended in greeting, the company cried with one voice, "Many happy returns, Old Playgoer !"

*The Adelphi
pit.*

Yes, that badge of age is fixed upon me at last ! The sere, the yellow play-

AN OLD PLAYGOER.

bill flutters in my mind's eye. I cannot get the "O.K. thing on Sunday " out of my ears. "Glasses round, cigars as well," is the signal for a long debauch of ancient melodrama. I see myself, a little deaf, hobbling with a stick, querulously piping, "Do you remember 'Flying Scud'?" I remember it, because it marks the first occasion when I visited a theatre unhampered by parental supervision. I paid my money at the door with independent magnificence, and sat in the Adelphi pit, regaled by odour of the orange, and dimly wondering why the juice was so closely allied to the tears of dramatic sensibility. I remember there was a race; a row of cardboard steeds, in a nice derangement of perspective, wriggled slowly past a grand stand, mute and petrified. Shade of Dion Boucicault, wizard of this enchantment! The last time I saw him, he gave a lecture on the Lyceum stage, and showed us the subtle art of managing a hat in an impressive scene. . . . I remember Ada Cavendish in "Clancarty," and the dashing courage of Henry Neville, as the Irish Jacobite, confronting Dutch William, and paying a handsome compliment to the usurper's bravery in the field. "Faith! no one ever saw your Highness's back," says the generous Irishman. I recall the phrase, because, when I first heard it, I was fresh from Macaulay and the romantic spell he had woven round the phlegmatic

AN OLD PLAYGOER.

Dutchman ; and I felt a swelling throb of enthusiasm.

*Lumps in the
throat.*

Oh, those swelling throbs in the theatre ! Some devotees of the stage collect play-bills. I have a large and varied collection of lumps in the throat. There is the "Olivia" lump ; the "Charles I." lump is nice and choking ; the "Becket" lump may be recommended to families with a slightly ecclesiastical turn ; the return-of-the-soldier lump, as in the famous case of George D'Alroy, is warranted to cause suffocation. Then there is the impulsive-generosity-in-the-most unexpected-quarter lump. I cannot even think of this specimen without an immediate access of throaty sentiment which calls to mind Hawkshaw the detective. When he confronts Brierly, the poor devil who deserves another chance, there is a pause, and the pit holds its breath. "I never saw him before," says the detective, and the lump does not choke some hundreds of citizens, only because they clear their throats with cheers. Hawkshaw is guilty of most unprofessional weakness, but he makes the biggest lump in my museum.

*A tiresome
spectre.*

Thus the Old Playgoer babbles, not of green fields, but of the primitive emotions. His memory becomes a sort of mill-

AN OLD PLAYGOER.

stone. I am dragged down by recollections of by-gone players who have left not a wrack behind. This horrible Birthday summoned before me an actress who used to play leading parts in semi-historical dramas with unblemished insipidity. Never was she betrayed into any display of spontaneous feeling. She was always the picture of wronged innocence, distinguished by appropriate costume and irreproachable breeding. She has long been dead, worthy soul ; but why am I haunted by her spectre ? She is at my elbow now, with her hands clasped on her bosom, and her eyes raised to heaven with all the earnestness of the images on the theatrical posters. I entreat her to leave me, and never return ; but she answers with grave politeness, "I cannot desert you : are you not an Old Playgoer ? "

*The lovely
Emma.*

Though her name is totally forgotten by the world, I know it will be my fate to revive it. Some day, an organ of opinion will confuse her with another actress, and I shall be impelled to indite this letter to the editor : "Sir, —You are in error in assigning to Miss Fotheringay the part of Cachouca in 'The Spanish Sarsaparilla' at Drury Lane. It was played by that lovely and accomplished artist, Emma Fitzrobinson, with a dramatic genius, such as the present degene-

MY FRIEND JUDSON.

rate age has never seen. Alas that so much beauty, grace, and talent should be so completely buried in oblivion!—Yours, in sorrow, An Old Playgoer.” I shall write that because the ghost of Emma, who, in life, bored me to death, will persuade me that it is my duty. She will produce her “notices,” sheaves of them, all declaring that, as Cachouca, she “left nothing to be desired.” “Cachouca found a winning representative in that popular actress, Miss Fitzrobinson.” “As Cachouca Miss Fitzrobinson played with her usual charm.” I am sure the ghosts of actresses read these delicate tributes to one another in the Elysian Fields, and swoop with them on the Old Playgoer, when he has to be stirred up to glorify the dead.

MY FRIEND JUDSON.

*How Judson
serves his
country.*

I AM always delighted, at a *première*, to find myself seated beside my old friend Judson, who has grown bald in the service of the drama and in a poorly requited devotion to his country. For how many years, in the dog-licence branch of the Inland Revenue, has Judson’s happy tact softened the rigour of an odious

MY FRIEND JUDSON.

impost? Some day I shall be fortunate, if opportunity permits me, to place him in a just light before his countrymen, by narrating the more striking episodes of an official career spent in the anxious task of preventing the bellows of a grasping department from kindling the spark of revolution into a devouring flame.

*An invaluable
companion.*

Well, at present I am concerned with him in his capacity as a first-nighter, when, spruce and smiling, he drops into his stall, hinting only to the scrutiny of friendship, by a scarcely perceptible shadow about the eyes, the fireman's duty he has been performing for an ungrateful Government from ten to four. On such an occasion Judson is an invaluable companion, for he knows everybody in the house; and, as he scans the boxes, he murmurs piquant details of the occupants, from the avaricious old Marchioness, of enormous wealth, who fights her dog-licence tooth-and-nail every year, to the actress, "who disappears from the bill, dear boy, on the plea of typhoid fever, or re-vaccination, every time she has a row with her manager."

*A Pontifex
with a past.*

The last time I met Judson in these circumstances, he had scarcely taken his seat when he uttered an exclamation. Follow-

MY FRIEND JUDSON.

ing the direction of his eyes, I perceived in a stage-box, behind a large bouquet, an elderly lady, still well preserved, bowing and smiling to various people in the stalls. "Phew!" whispered Judson, "this is going to be an eventful evening. You recognise the woman in the box?"

"Oh, yes," I said; "everybody knows old Mrs. Pontifex. She married years ago, and left the stage. Pontifex was Minister to Abyssinia, and they *do* say that, at the Abyssinian Court, she——"

"My dear boy," interrupted Judson, "don't let us waste time over stale anecdotes. The dramatic coincidence to-night is that Mrs. Pontifex is in that box, and that Ada Sonning, the finest actress of her time, sir, is the heroine of the new play."

I always like to pique Judson about his notorious admiration for Miss Sonning; so I said, "Oh, come now; Mrs. Pontifex, in her day, was simply great in just those parts which the fair Ada plays very prettily, I admit, but without any power."

"Indeed!" retorted Judson, quite unruffled, "I happen to remember a night in this very theatre when Mrs. Pontifex showed that she was scarcely of your opinion, when she dreaded the genius of a slip of a girl, a mere beginner, and tried to crush her by a cruel trick, played in that very box by the woman you see smiling there! I don't suppose

MY FRIEND JUDSON.

there's another man here," added Judson, with pride, "who has the least inkling of the real comedy we are going to witness now. I'll wager that after the third act old Mamma Pontifex will throw that bouquet to Ada Sonning, and to-morrow the papers will gush over this spontaneous tribute from a great actress whose career is over to her young and beautiful successor. Ha!"

*'Come and
be my
understudy.'* "Do you remember," resumed Judson, when the first act was at an end, "a piece called 'A Daughter of Lucifer,' in which Mrs. Pontifex—Cecilia Anthony, as she was then—played a gambler's wife who is used as a decoy? Of course you don't. This flood of pessimistic stuff that we get on the stage now has swept the old landmarks away, and the real drama, sir, flickers among amateur dramatic clubs in the suburbs! Well, when 'A Daughter of Lucifer' was done in this theatre, Ada Sonning had an engagement in the company as Cecilia's understudy. It was Mrs. P.'s habit to patronise young and unknown actresses in this way. She would meet them at afternoon teas, and gush over them, and say, 'My dear, I know what it is to be struggling and friendless in our profession. Come and be my understudy; and, when you are famous, you can say that Cecilia Anthony gave you a help-

MY FRIEND JUDSON.

ing hand.' Bless you, Mrs. P. believes to this day that she has helped every actress on the stage! She has brought that big bouquet over there as a floral crown of her benevolence. But she enjoyed such robust health that she was never out of the bill, and so the understudy used to wait a year or two, and then drift off into another company; and Cecilia would turn up her fine eyes, and say the ingratitude of girls was enough to break the largest heart. She wanted to be a mother to them, but the unnatural chicks deserted the nest, and came to no good.

*Comedy of
a sprained
ankle.*

“ Well, one day Cecilia, for the first time in her life, had an accident, and was kept indoors with a sprained ankle. She fumed, and told the doctor she would act in spite of him; but at last she gave in, and Ada Sonning was told that she must play the part. Now, that night, by mere chance, I came into the theatre, and found everybody in a dejected state over the announcement that Miss Anthony was indisposed, and that Miss Sonning would take her place. Who was Miss Sonning? None of us had ever heard her name. When she came on, she was received with that chilly little perfunctory clapping which is worse than no applause at all, and means to say, ‘ Well, if you must, you must,

MY FRIEND JUDSON.

but we would rather you didn't'; and there she stood with downcast head, almost too nervous to speak, till she lifted her glorious eyes with an appealing look at us; and then, by George, sir, we gave her a round that made the actors stare!"

*A touching
reconciliation.*

"My dear Judson," I interjected, "who would suppose your seasoned bosom to be so inflammable?"

"Damn it, sir," said Judson; "the sight of mere beauty in distress couldn't have moved me a jot! But the thrill we got from those eyes, sir, was genius! Incompetent charmers can't palm themselves off on me. She hadn't uttered twenty lines when I turned to the man next to me—it was Tommy Baxter, of the War Office, and we hadn't exchanged a word for years—some bother about his maiden aunt, who kept a houseful of dogs without a licence to their backs—and I said, 'Tommy, old man, this girl will knock the town!' 'Jack, my boy,' he answered, gripping my hand, 'she's a stunner, and no mistake!'

*Importance
of a stick.*

"Well, about the middle of the second act there was a noise in that stage-box where Mrs. P. is still smiling. Two women came in with a clatter, one of them hobbling with a stick. Mark the stick; it is

MY FRIEND JUDSON.

important evidence. She seemed to be very old, had white hair, and more than a suggestion of a moustache. She glowered at the play-bill through her eyeglasses, and then, speaking in French in a querulous voice, quite audible all over the stalls, she said, 'But Miss Anthony does not play to-night. Who is this young person?' Her companion replied that it was the understudy, and the old woman gabbled her disappointment till the audience got angry, and cries of 'Shut up!' came from the pit.

Ibsen's oversight. "Well, after that she seemed to sleep; but in the third act, you remember—oh! you don't. What's the good of being a playgoer in these times? Why, sir, if Ibsen had written that act it would have done him more honour than all his gin-in-the-back-parlour dramas that you rave about! In the third act is the great scene of the play; the gambler's wife finds that her husband has lured her old lover to his ruin. She is determined to save him, and changes the cards; and when the infuriated gambler curses her for duping him, she flings the marked pack into the fire. That was a climax, my boy, if you like; and, to do her justice, Cecilia was always splendid in the scene; but, compared with Ada, she was nothing at all.

MY FRIEND JUDSON.

*The War
Office clears
for action.*

“Now, when it came to this point, I saw the old woman wake up and glare. Just as Ada raised the cards to pitch them into the grate, and everybody was breathless, that infernal old creature threw herself back in her chair with a croaking laugh. The next moment Ada staggered down to the footlights, flung the cards bang into the box, right in the old harridan’s face, and fell down in a dead faint. By George, sir, you never saw such a scene in your life! The pit rose like one man, and yelled with delight. Had they been men, and not women, in the box, I believe Tommy Baxter of the War Office would have stormed it single-handed. They were frightened enough, for they rushed out in the tumult, and nobody saw them again.”

*The jealousy
of actresses.*

“Well,” I said, “what is the bearing of this remarkable tale on Mrs. Pontifex’s gracious presence to-night?”

Judson gazed at me as if I were an incomprehensible dullard.

“Don’t you see, man? The old woman was Cecilia Anthony herself, so admirably made up as an aged French dame that her greatest admirers, even the attendants of the theatre, didn’t know her! She had to hobble with a stick because of her ankle, and the pain couldn’t have improved her temper.”

MY FRIEND JUDSON.

“And the other woman?”

“Her French maid, no doubt.”

“Who must have been known at the theatre?”

“Oh, I suppose she was disguised too. Nothing easier than that to an adept like the Mrs. P. of old time. Or, if you like, she was a pal of the maid’s. There’s nothing in that objection.”

“Well, what followed?”

“Cecilia came down next night and played the part, though she could scarcely stand. Ada Sonning never had another chance in that company, you may be sure. It was said that she taxed Cecilia with the trick, and there was a fearful shindy.”

“Now tell me, Judson, did you ever hear this improbable suggestion from her own lips?”

“Improbable! I like your innocence. Much you know about the jealousy of actresses! Why, when they are in that state the dear things stick at nothing, though I must say Ada Sonning is an unselfish creature; never utters an unkind word about a living soul. But she has had lots of tantrums since then—bless you, there’s always a cyclone blowing behind the scenes! Still, I bet she is thinking of that old flare-up to-night. There! What did I tell you? Mrs. P. has thrown the bouquet! Neat return for that pack of cards, eh? Poetic justice and real life too! Why don’t your playwrights give us that?”

JUDSON ON DRAMATIC CRITICISM.

I hope they will give us something as persuasive as Judson's legend of the histrionic temperament.

JUDSON ON DRAMATIC CRITICISM.

*Why read press
notices?*

I HAVE been conning lately some earnest assurances that players never read "press notices." The public must have a strange taste for these compositions, or else the gentlemen who occupy so many seats on a first night, signal to one another with expressive eyebrows, and even write busily as the play goes on, would be engaged in some other kind of light evening employment. But the actor, as I gather from certain statements in the witness-box, pays no heed to the mass of printed matter of which he is the great first cause. When he opens his morning paper, he turns to the stocks, or the foreign intelligence, digests the leader on the situation in the Transvaal, and passes over without the smallest interest the column and a half in which his personal deserts are discussed with amicable frankness.

*Unimportance of
the Dramatic
Critic.*

The actress is, if possible, more indifferent to the labours of the gentlemen who eyed her without bias the

JUDSON ON DRAMATIC CRITICISM.

night before. She knows nothing of them personally ; to her they are the horrid creatures who never join in the applause. A dramatic critic, you understand, must not applaud in a theatre ; such an act would raise a suspicion of undignified partiality. When the audience cannot contain their enthusiasm, when that metallic gong which is known as the welkin performs its usual peal, when palm meets palm in the shock of ecstasy, you will observe rows of stolid images, without souls, each with a little phrase-factory buzzing in his head. It is not upon them that the actress smiles so bewitchingly when she takes her call. And, next day, why should she bother about the newspapers which, as a lady remarked in the witness-box, print "such a lot of things" ?

*Evil prominence
of the play-
wright.* I put this question to Judson, who knows the actress-mind better than any man of my acquaintance.

"Judson," I said, "give me your advice. I hear that the dramatic critics are seriously thinking of throwing up the business. One of them told me to-day he thought of trying cattle-ranching in Texas. 'What's the good,' he said, 'of writing notices which no actress ever reads ? Away in the Far West, I shall murmur my reflections on the drama in the unsophisticated ear of Rosalie, the prairie-flower.' "

JUDSON ON DRAMATIC CRITICISM.

“Well,” replied Judson, thoughtfully, “you writing fellows might do worse than let the stage alone. You have fallen into bad habits lately ; one of them is the excessive attention you give to the playwright. Why, I frequently see a whole column about the play, while the actors are dismissed in ten lines.”

“But surely the play’s the thing, Judson ; your actresses must be provided with words and a story to bustle in.”

*A new school
of acting.* “Bless you ! if half-a-dozen actresses I know were to put their heads together, they could do without your dramatist entirely. I don’t mind telling you that is my great idea for a new school of acting. Just think of it ! A school in which you could suit the word to the action, the action to the word ; that is to say, your blessed story would evolve itself out of gesture, voice, attitude, walk. Pathos would enter, and drop into a chair up stage ; fiery passion, or dignified expostulation, would come on right centre, and comic relief romp in from the left. Put these expressions into the care of competent artists, and do you mean to tell me they couldn’t invent a capital drama as they went along ? Why, sir, I undertake to say that in a year or two, a manager could engage a company at the school, play and all ;

JUDSON ON DRAMATIC CRITICISM.

and your dramatists would have to take to type-writing ! ”

*Down with
Aristotle !* “ Perhaps you don’t know,” continued Judson, “ that in my early days as a Government servant, I used to write dramatic notices ? ”

“ Which were read by the actresses ? ”

“ I should think they were, sir ! We didn’t indulge then in your confounded metaphysics. When I praised an actress, I did it in a way she could understand, with none of your Aristotle and algebraic equations. My articles in the *Dramatic Teetotum*, as I have reason to know, were cut out and pasted in books.”

“ And what was your critical method ? ” I asked.

“ My method, dear boy, was to make it clear that the stage belongs to the players, and not to outsiders who want to use it as a dumping-ground for fads. The personality of the actor, and especially of the actress, was quite good enough for me. I can tell you that the day I went on the *Teetotum* was the turning-point of its career. By George, sir ! the dramatists were afraid of me. I told Rowland Smike, who wrote the burlesque of ‘ Little Boadicea, or Down among the Druids,’ that the part he gave to Sophy Skittlewell was a

JUDSON ON DRAMATIC CRITICISM.

public scandal. She threw it up and cancelled her agreement, and her manager dared not bring an action for fear of the *Teetotum*.

*Touching tribute
to Judson.*

“I didn’t know Sophy in those days ; but after she married the brewer who received a baronetcy last year, I dined one evening at her house, and in the library, sir, what do you suppose was the most highly valued work ?”

“Oh, I should say a history of hops from the earliest times.”

“No, my boy ; it was a beautifully bound volume, containing my articles from the *Teetotum* on the famous controversy about ‘Little Boadicea.’ I was quite affected, and when the hostess said, ‘Ah, Mr. Judson, that recalls one of my oldest and staunchest friends, who did me a great service, though I don’t know his name to this day,’ I simply laid the book on my heart, and made her a profound bow. She looked at me a moment, and her eyes filled with tears ; and, by George, sir ! I believe that if it hadn’t been for the company, which included a colonial bishop, she would have hugged me !”

“Judson,” I said, “your modesty is ennobling !”

“Pooh !” said he ; “but that shows you what dramatic criticism ought to be, and why actresses would read it if you gave them the opportunity.”

CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF JUDSON.

*Confidence of
maidens in
Judson.*

“IN your capacity as patron of the drama, Judson,” I remarked to my old friend one day, “you must have befriended many novices on the stage.”

“I believe you, my boy—chiefly girls. The most extraordinary thing in my life is the way girls have always confided in me. Do you remember that old gag of Toole’s, ‘Keep your eye on your father, and he will pull you through’? That’s just how those trusting blossoms regarded my disinterested cunning.”

“So, when they wanted engagements, you stepped in as the Universal Parent?”

“Why, sir, they used to write in shoals to the *Teetotum*, begging me to recommend them to managers!”

“And did their fond mammas share this epidemic of childlike faith?”

*Motherly
appeals.*

“I do not hesitate to say,” replied Judson, with his most distinguished air, “that among the mothers of struggling actresses my name is a household word. Bless you, they wrote letters, too; endless panegyrics of Jane and Susan, who had spouted Shakespeare at family gather-

CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF JUDSON.

ings from the age of six ; were tall and graceful ; remarkable for their memory and the whiteness of their teeth ; and had impressed the local curate with the refining influence of the skirt-dance. Then there were photographs ; and didn't I see Jane's striking resemblance to Ellen Terry ? Man, could I disdain these motherly appeals ? Could I say that Jane, simpering as Ophelia, or Susan, powdered and patched like Lady Teazle for the whirl of rank and fashion at the assembly rooms of her native market-town, would be better employed at the sewing-machine ? No, sir ; the worst rule in life is to advise women for their good against the very thing they are resolved to do.

Is there a dog-licence for cats ? “But the oddest experience I ever had came about in quite a different way. One morning there bounced into the dog-licence department an elderly lady, in a most excited state, accompanied by a girl, a Persian cat, and a parrot. I asked the old lady what she wanted, and she said she came for justice. ‘I have been grossly insulted by one of your people, a horrid, prying man, who says I keep a dog, and he'll summons me for not paying for it. Is *this* a dog ?’

“Here she opened a basket, and out popped the cat, which promptly upset an inkstand all over my annual report to the Commissioners on the secretive

CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF JUDSON.

habits of the dog-loving population—a document I flatter myself that the public always anticipates with the keenest zest.”

“You are right, Judson,” I said; “a valuable contribution to the social history of our time.”

“Well,” he continued, “before I had got over this surprise, the old lady uncovered the cage, with the parrot inside, and cried, ‘Is *this* a dog?’ The parrot nodded to me, as if I were an old acquaintance, and croaked, ‘Albert! This looks bad!’

*Striking gifts
of a parrot.* “Then the old lady wept. Albert, she said, was her son, now abroad; he enlisted, and nearly broke her heart; he was such a good boy at home; and when he lay in bed with a fractured rib, after falling off a bicycle, he taught the parrot such amusing tricks. It would march to the tune of ‘Tommy Atkins,’ which she never could remember, but Aggie knew it. ‘Aggie, hum “Tommy Atkins,” that’s a good girl.’ Aggie blushed, and favoured me and the parrot with a few bars of that inspiring ballad; and, sure enough, the bird jumped up and down on his perch with martial gravity.

*Judson excites
expectations.* “Meanwhile the cat had upset two more inkstands, and the office was demoralised by vain attempts to catch her.

CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF JUDSON.

“‘Madam,’ I said hastily, ‘I am afraid this charming interview must end. The threat of a summons is most improper ; you cannot pay for a dog-licence on a cat and a parrot. I make that admission freely. If you should have any further trouble, pray communicate with me. My name is Judson—Mortimer Judson.’

“‘Oh, Mr. Judson!’ the girl exclaimed, and then blushed again.

“The next moment the old lady was shaking me fervently by the hand. ‘I *am* glad to meet you,’ she said ; ‘we take the *Teetotum* every week, and Aggie reads your articles aloud. And we’ve heard of your kindness to girls who want to go on the stage. Now there’s Aggie eating her heart out ; we’ve tried all the agents ; but if you would hear her recite ; not now, of course—Aggie, *do* call the cat ; I know this place is for dogs only !—but if you will come and see us, dear Mr. Judson ; you have no idea of Aggie’s lovely——”

“‘Mamma!’ said the girl ; and just
Real auburn. then she put her hand to her head, and down came her hair, yards of it—real auburn, my boy. Oh, I’ve never had any reason to doubt that ; but whether she let it down by art or accident, whether it was the scurry after the cat, or a dramatic sense of a good climax that dis-

CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF JUDSON.

hevelled my lady, I have never been sure. The office gasped its admiration, and it was high time to bundle my remarkable visitors into the passage where mamma repeated her address for the sixth time, and the parrot shrieked, ‘Albert, you beauty!’”

*A giddy Roman
matron.*

“And did you pursue this quest of a dramatic prodigy?”

“Prodigy!” echoed Judson. “I give you my word that she never recited to me without her hair down! Either it tumbled of its own sweet accord, or I found the Niagara already turned on. And her mother was always by with a brush and comb! I remarked on one occasion that it was very beautiful hair, of course, very suitable to ‘The Lady of Shalott,’ but not quite in keeping with Hamlet’s address to the players. Aggie tossed her head, and said she didn’t see the use of appearing on the stage at all if she couldn’t display this precious auburn cataract. What can you say to a girl who has no other attraction? I got her an engagement to walk on as a Roman matron in Rowland Smike’s great classical drama, ‘Horatius,’ and she nearly ruined the piece on the first night.”

“How did she manage that?”

*An injured
tragedian.*

“Well, she was fretful at rehearsals because they made her coil up her

CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF JUDSON.

blessed hair; and, in the middle of the performance, just when McStringer, the great Scotch tragedian—you don't remember him? Fine actor, sir, when he could wear a toga and crimp his fringe! London has forgotten him; but he wrote me a letter the other day, saying he was drawing crowded houses in Patagonia. Well, just as McStringer was beginning his famous speech to the Roman populace, I saw Aggie put her hand to her head—the old fatal sign! Yes, and down came the hair, till the Roman populace could tread on it! There was a shout of laughter from the gallery, and I thought McStringer would have an apoplectic fit. What could you do with a girl like that? I told her that Smike ought to write a play specially for her hair to foam in; and I'm blest if her mother didn't take it seriously, and propose this brilliant enterprise to him on my authority!

*Lunatic or
fibber?*

“Well, I daresay you'll think the sequel incredible.”

“My dear Judson!” I protested, “your tales of the histrionic temperament carry conviction to the most sceptical.”

“Her mother descended on the office again.”

“With the parrot?”

“It was no joke,” said Judson, gravely. “She said her daughter had disappeared; was in the river,

CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF JUDSON.

most likely ; the jealousy of those women had driven Aggie to suicide ; why had I lured her into that dreadful profession ? I was a little irritated by this, and asked what on earth there was to be jealous of.

““Oh, Mr. Judson,’ wailed the old lady ; ‘*you* ask such a question. *You* who told her that her beautiful hair was the only support of the declining drama !’

“You see what it means to jest with some women ! I began to think I was responsible for this unfortunate girl’s tragic end. By George, sir, the office glared at me as if I were a callous monster ! Then I was told, with sobs, that Aggie had overheard the leading lady and one of the dressers at the theatre plotting to cut off the locks which sustained the drama and excited jealous fury in the bosoms of rivals. Clearly this young woman was either deranged or a fibber on a colossal scale. But what had become of her ? I didn’t believe she was in the river ; the hair of a drowned corpse, you know, does not look pretty ; though, when I mentioned this to the office, there was a perceptible shudder at such brutal cynicism.

Judson’s quest. “That afternoon I walked the streets distractedly, looking for a head of hair.

I can’t recommend this as a pastime,” added Judson,

CURIOUS ADVENTURE OF JUDSON.

grimly ; “it attracts unfavourable attention. There was a slight fog, and I had to stare rather closely at the women, and some of them resented it.”

“No, Judson,” I interrupted, “don’t say that the magic of your liquid eye——”

“Stuff, sir ! I tell you that in a very short time the hand of a burly policeman fell on my shoulder, and a gruff voice growled, ‘Look here, my man, no more of this. I’ve watched you loitering for the last six weeks.’ I paid no heed to him, for at that moment I saw her, sitting in a window, with her back to the pavement. There was a small crowd gazing.

*Triumph of
the hair.*

“‘What lovely ’air she’s got !’ said one woman. ‘’Taint real, yer ninny,’ said another. ‘She’s a wax figure, goin’ by clock-work.’

“I knew better ; her hand went up to the back of her head with the old familiar trick, and the hair came down in a torrent, and the crowd said, ‘Oh-h-h !’ as they do at the Crystal Palace fireworks.

“I rushed away from the policeman, and bounded into the shop. A bland and smiling person behind the counter offered me a bottle. ‘Only two-and-six,’ he said ; ‘warranted to produce a glossy——’ I removed my hat, and, at the sight of my bald

JUDSON AS A DOG FANCIER.

pate, a shout of laughter went up from the crowd outside.

“‘Aggie, I demanded sternly, ‘what folly is this?’ You’ll scarcely credit it, but she answered calmly, ‘Don’t trouble about me, Mr. Judson. I’ve got a theatre of my own now, and a public all to myself. I’ve just written to mother, telling her about my new career ; she’ll be delighted.’

“By this time the crowd was in the shop, bursting itself with joy, and the burly policeman dragged me off to the station, where I was charged as a well-known loiterer ! Luckily I knew the inspector, or there would have been a nice case in the papers for the dog department of the Inland Revenue. Phew !” concluded Judson, wiping his brow, “whenever I see rich auburn tresses now, I feel like rabies !”

JUDSON AS A DOG FANCIER.

*Shakespeare's
foresight.*

It was not without shrewdness that a French writer said every Englishman was mad once in the twenty-four hours, and suicide was the god of our country. In this judgment he was in a measure anticipated by Shakespeare—who has not been anticipated by Shakespeare ?—for does

JUDSON AS A DOG FANCIER.

not the First Gravedigger remark that Hamlet's madness will not be seen in England? "There the men are as mad as he." Sometimes it is thought that only the dogs are mad, or in danger of losing their wits; and then there is much to-do about the enforcement of a muzzling order. A certain asylum at Battersea is overcrowded with canine vagrants, helpless, bewildered, clamorous; stout policemen may be seen in chase of four-footed outlaws; old ladies, whose pets, with marvellous sagacity, take off the muzzles and hang them on the garden railings, are indignant that this achievement is resented by the authorities, instead of being crowned with laurel by the *Spectator*; and all because the bipeds who manage our affairs choose to disguise their own aberrations by treating every dog as a possible maniac. "There the men"—not the dogs, mind you—"are as mad as he." I commend this to any commentator who would like to prove his learning and acuteness by showing that Shakespeare, out of the mouth of the First Gravedigger, passed a comprehensive judgment on the scattered wits of these islands.

*Absence of sun
the root of
crime.*

This theory is not so fantastic when you consider that for a whole winter we often have about six hours of sunshine. For months the sun virtually withholds his

JUDSON AS A DOG FANCIER.

countenance from the luckless denizens of this city ; we live by day under a yellow pall masquerading as the heavens, from which droppeth the gentle soot ; and laundresses make hay without the help of sunshine, for no collar is able to face the daylight and preserve its self-esteem for an hour. What profits it to understand the merits of a spotless shirt, as Tennyson said, if half the little soul be dirt ? Yes, the grime of this sunless climate penetrates to the recesses of our being ; soot clogs the spirit, and enfolds conscience as with a garment. If you could go deep down to the roots of crime, you would not find them embedded in the “ penny dreadful,” which some philosophers regard as the soil of evil ; you would see them ramifying wheré no beam from heaven ever falls, where the steady downpour of “ blacks ” fertilises everything malign.

*Ibsen on the
British climate.* Here, in this abysmal gloom, don't you hear the cry of the idiot boy in Ibsen, “ Mother, give me the sun ” ? Without it, we crawl about with unstable reason, every man looking into his neighbour's face with an inquiring stare, as if he saw a haggard reflection of his own foreboding. And still the canopy above us is a yellow counterfeit of the sky, and still the soot comes down ; and we muzzle all the dogs to stave off the general madness !

JUDSON AS A DOG FANCIER.

*Strange conduct
of a meta-
physician.*

I know this is not a nightmare, for the manner of some of my friends is distinctly strange. One of them, whom I have hitherto regarded as that rarity, a metaphysician with a clear head, has taken to propounding conundrums about the income-tax. He looks at me with a glittering eye, when we meet in the street, and says, "Do you know how to reduce the income-tax by one half?" I suggest various unlikely conditions—a gigantic surplus, a benignant Chancellor of the Exchequer, a charitable distribution of the currency.

"No," says he, "you haven't hit it at all. Let every man pay his income-tax in full, and the Government will be able to reduce the incubus to fourpence." He goes on like this indefinitely, with figures, till I have a vision of those remorseful letters of the alphabet, which send conscience-money to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, holding a secret meeting, and passing a resolution to pay their income-tax regularly and fully for evermore. I escape with a reeling brain, only to stumble across Judson.

*Dog fanciers con-
sult Judson.*

"I am taking a little walk," he explains. "The office is a perfect kennel. People imagine that the dog-licence department is responsible for the muzzling order, and

JUDSON AS A DOG FANCIER.

they bring dogs by dozens to show me that the beasts can't possibly wear muzzles. Why, sir, I have just torn myself away from an old woman who begged me to keep her wretched brute till the order is withdrawn. She couldn't afford a muzzle, she said, and I had a nice face, and she was sure I should be kind to her William."

"William?"

"The cur's name—a sandy-haired mongrel with one eye!"

"Ah!" I say, glancing up at the yellow sham over our heads, "she, too, wants the blessed sun!"

"Sun? Pooh!" says Judson, "I tell you that if I didn't earn a Government salary out of dogs, and if I didn't expect a decent pension from dogs, I'd like to see them dead in heaps—hecatombs!" He flourishes his arms over the expanse of Trafalgar Square. "I have just had a row with Ada Sonning, all through sending her a confounded muzzle!"

"What! My dear Judson, you don't mean to say the order applies to charming——?"

"Don't be an idiot! I tell you she has a dog, a regular vixen, and I sent it a muzzle, and Ada has written to say she will not speak to me again, and encloses this."

JUDSON AS A DOG FANCIER.

*Cordelia presents
a muzzle to
Judson.*

He hands me a slip of paper, on which is an excellent caricature of himself in a muzzle, with this inscription :
“Miss Cordelia”—“the beast’s name,” growls Judson—“presents her compliments to Mr. Judson, and thinks the muzzle is better suited to his style of beauty.”

“You’ll scarcely credit it, but I gave her that dog. Heavens !” exclaims Judson, invoking the yellowness overhead, “what a fuss women make about their infernal animals ! This isn’t the first row with Ada over a dog. On the hundredth night of ‘The Cask of Amontillado,’ Rowland Smike’s famous adaptation of Poe—I suppose you’ll say you never saw it ! Where has he been brought up ?” This is addressed to an impassive lion in the Square. “A rattling melodrama, sir ! You should have seen Ada in the cellar, bursting the bars of the cage in which her lover had been left by the villain to perish. Not exactly Poe, you know, but much more effective. By Jove, sir, the Adelphi never had such a pit and gallery as during the run of that piece ! Well, on the hundredth night, I left the beast in a hamper at the stage door, and I had a very different sort of letter from the insulting screed you have just read.”

“There must have been a summer sun !” I murmur.

JUDSON AS A DOG FANCIER.

"Hang it, man, don't keep on raving about the sun!" says Judson. "Well, I packed that hamper with care. There was the dog, of course, and a new collar, and a lot of dog-biscuits, and a year's licence. Thoughtful, eh? Bless you, it was all thrown away!"

"But you said you had a charming letter."

*A simple family
coachman.*

"Yes, my boy, that was in the first flush of Ada's enthusiasm. But, you see, the dog didn't come up to expectations. I didn't know much about dogs in those days, and I had consulted a sporting friend, who rubbed his chin and said, 'Ah! what you want is a young dog, and young dogs are expensive in the market. You had better look up some family coachman who breeds dogs down a mews in a quiet way.' I kept an eye on family coachmen for a fortnight, and one day I followed an old boy with white hair into his stable-yard, and asked him if he had any dogs. What sort of dog might I be wanting? A young dog? He had a little fox-terrier, just out of its mother's arms, and that full of spirits he wondered how its body held 'em.

*Orlando is
indisposed.*

"He opened a stable door, and out rushed a troop of dogs, with this paragon of a fox-terrier as sportive as any. Well,

JUDSON AS A DOG FANCIER.

for a high-bred, very young dog like that, he couldn't take less than five pounds, and then he was giving it away. He rubbed his chin, and wagged his head, and seemed to think he was bringing a slur on the family coach. So I closed with him at once ; and, would you believe it ? next day, I had a frantic note from Ada ; something was the matter with Orlando—she called him Orlando because she was going to play Rosalind the following season—and I was to come instantly and explain.

“I found the young Orlando asleep on an embroidered cushion, and Rosalind wringing her hands over his heedless form. ‘He won't wake up,’ she wailed. ‘He won't eat ! What have you done to him ?’ Why, sir, I might have been a malefactor, caught in the act of poisoning Orlando with his licence ! ‘Oh, come,’ I said ; ‘he was all right yesterday, when I saw him frisking about in the mews. Hi ! Orlando ! Rats !’ You should have seen the look the beast gave me out of the corner of his eye. He got up from the cushion, staggered across the room, crawled under the sofa, and died !”

“My dear Judson, no doubt he had overeaten himself with biscuit in the hamper.”

*Orlando is a
senile fraud.*

“Biscuit, indeed,” says Judson, grimly. “I sent for a vet., sir, and he said at once that the young Orlando had simply died of

JUDSON AS A DOG FANCIER.

old age. That coachman with the white hair had sold me a senile terrier as old as himself! What sort of a corner do you suppose is reserved for family coachmen in another world? As for Ada she went on like anything. Was it a heartless joke on my part? What was the good of being in the dog-licence office of the Inland Revenue if I didn't know a puppy from a dotard? I assure you that I avoided the subject of dogs with Ada for a long while, till ill-luck threw me in the way of Cordelia.

"She's a beautiful dog; the only drawback is that she always tries to bite *me*! When the order was issued, I thought here was an excellent opportunity to keep the little devil's jaws from nipping my calves, at any rate in public. So I sent a nice new muzzle, with a careful explanation of the law, and here's another row! Well, I hope Ada will get a summons; a pretty figure she'll cut before the beak!"

*Ada melts the
beak.*

"She will, Judson," I say. "A saint in her injuries, she'll move the court to tears."

"By Jove, I shouldn't be surprised," he assents cheerfully. "It may be one of her most successful parts. I'll get a seat on the bench."

"If we have not all committed suicide before then!"

TO WINIFRED EVANS.

“Suicide !”

“Yes ; there’s no sun.”

“Bother the sun !” cries Judson. “You’ve got it on the brain !” Alack ! would it were so !

TO WINIFRED EVANS.

*Invocation of
Winifred.*

WHERE art thou, Winifred Evans, daughter of Cambria, imaged in my memory as a damsel in distress ? Amongst those ancient mountains and those lovely vales which used to echo the loyal strains of Brinley Richards, art thou a mother of winsome daughters who murmur the melodious tongue of an ancient race ? I behold thee, Winifred, carrying in thy bosom an awesome legend, fearful to whisper it in other ears, and fearful, too, lest for lack of it some innocent slip of a girl in thy slim and tender brood should have no wholesome warning against the wiles of the Saxon.

*Her personal
charms.*

Many years have rolled over our heads, leaving yours, I am sure, still ungrizzled ; your lines have fallen in pleasant places ; you are buxom, Winifred, though, when

TO WINIFRED EVANS.

we met, you were slender, and, to a captious eye, a trifle angular ; you have a husband, no doubt, who is a worthy descendant of warrior and lyrical prophet, of Llewellyn and Cadwallader, an implacable foe of tithes, and a glorious minstrel at the Eisteddfod. I see thee amidst these honours and possessions, with every boon that makes for righteousness and peace ; and yet between thy dusky brows, Winifred, there is a line of care, an ineffaceable crease of perplexity and dread, which was carved there on the day when thou and I took that eventful journey to Paris.

*She comes from
Plinlimmon.*

I hasten to silence malignant sniffs by stating that we were not alone, that I was still in the flush of guileless boyhood, that you were evidently my senior by several years, and that your particular style of beauty did not appeal to me in the least. These disclaimers will not hurt you, Winifred, should they catch your eye in the land of Glendower, for there was nothing in the first glance you cast upon me to suggest the dawn of love's young dream. We were accompanied by a guide, philosopher, and friend, with whom we had the scantiest acquaintance. You had come from the shadows of Plinlimmon, I from the banks of the Mersey. Parents and guardians, of a most confiding disposition, had entrusted us to the care

TO WINIFRED EVANS.

of a perfect stranger, who had advertised his readiness to conduct parties on foreign travel, an idea since elaborated by Mr. Cook with such fulness that to-day the humblest wayfarer nods affably to the universe. But our conductor, Winifred, though the look of him might have inspired confidence in any enthusiast for humanitarian principles, seemed to awaken distrust in your virgin soul.

*She asks for
the party.*

He had an open brow, a kindling eye, the tolerant smile of one who has seen life in many aspects ; but he had no luggage to speak of, and the party he was conducting did not fill a railway carriage. When you joined us in a hat that disappointed me, for I had studied the headgear of Welsh ladies in pictures, and yours had no suggestion of Plinlimmon's majesty ; when you joined us, I say, the party consisted of just two persons, and I observed a swift misgiving in your first greetings. Why did our preceptor suddenly lose that fluency with which he had been discoursing to me on literature and the arts ? Your eyes were grey, Winifred, that kind of grey which sends a cold beam through the tissues, and photographs the innermost secrets of a troubled conscience. In response to glowing periods about the weather, you answered icily, " Where's the party ? " and the poor man fidgeted haplessly in his corner, and, at every

TO WINIFRED EVANS.

wayside station, put his head out of the window, as if to discern the local gentry hasting to our excursion. They did not come ; by some accident they had all missed the train ; and still you fixed our guide with that frigid gaze, and murmured, "Where's the party?"

*Winifred and
Angelina.*

That night we took the Newhaven boat ; a mellow summer moon gilded the tranquil waters ; it was a night that rejected slumber and summoned poesy ; yet you did not regale us with songs of your mountain home, but held aloof with your head buried in a shawl that might have been more daintily adjusted. Our conductor, agitated by your behaviour, sat near the prow, and explained to me that his wife was waiting for us in the Rue Jacob, where even a Welshwoman of high lineage would find an asylum which would cast no slur upon her pedigree. There were few passengers ; two walked the deck with monotonous tramp, joyously discussing an Italian adventure, in which a certain Lady Angelina, the cousin of one of them, had looked stunning in her night-attire during an alarm of earthquake. Could it have been that anecdote of the Lady Angelina's predicament which prompted you, Winifred, to throw yourself on the sympathy of her cousin and her friend ? Did you think that

TO WINIFRED EVANS.

their fortitude in an earthquake made them the natural protectors of helpless women? Or did your pride of ancestry instinctively recognise in them a kindred breeding?

*She appeals to
blue blood.*

Who shall unravel the intricacies of a feminine mind under the influence of terror, and spurred to desperate resolution by imaginary peril? Suffice it that I heard a hysterical voice from the shawl addressing the two companions in the accents of appeal. "Good heavens!" groaned our philosopher and friend, "what's the woman up to now?" I approached you quietly, and heard you say, "Yes, gentlemen, it's a trick, I'm sure it's a trick to injure a poor, defenceless girl! He advertised an excursion to Paris, and he's got my money, and what I say is, 'Where's his party?' Do you think I'd be here, without another woman, alone with him and that young man——" "Man!" interjected one of her listeners. "Don't worry; he's only a kid." "Kid or no kid, I say, 'Where's the party?'"

*She exposes me
to gibes.*

Have you ever reflected since, Winifred, that here was a triple tragedy? In the tumult of your alarms, you supposed that our preceptor, a man of taste and benevolence,

TO WINIFRED EVANS.

seeking to support his family by initiating us in the decorous delights of Paris, was engaged in fraud, if not in abduction, and that I, with a mantling innocence on my brow, was a partner of his guilt ! Has no arrow of remorse rankled in your mind because you exposed me to the cynical flippancy of a stranger who said I was a kid ? I explained to him that you were the victim of imagination, heated possibly by an unbecoming shawl, that there was no monster of perfidy in the case ; and he declared it was the “rummest go” he had ever heard of, not excluding the apparition of the Lady Angelina in the earthquake. His friend said I was a juvenile Lothario, and offered me a cigar, which I had to decline, as smoking on the sea has never agreed with me, either in youth or middle-age ; then they asked me with what liquor I kept up my pecker on these illicit expeditions, and proposed a visit to the saloon-bar, where the vibration of the machinery is always most disturbing.

*She is no
Helen.*

There were other pleasantries which delicacy forbids me to mention ; but a regard for wholesome truth compels me to tell you that, when the victim of your mistrust heard he was an abductor, he exclaimed, “ Bless my soul ! is the woman mad ? If I wanted to carry any one off, should I choose *her* ? ” I regret to say that

TO WINIFRED EVANS.

when the morning light disclosed your features once more, Winifred, they were not such as drive men distraught, break up homes, and set fire to the topmost towers of Ilium. You were no Helen, with a red nose and inflamed eyes; but I am willing to allow that this disfigurement may have been due to the bitterness of finding no knight-errant to rescue Welsh maidenhood from the toils of the dissolute on a Channel steamer.

*She is upset
by profane
minstrelsy.*

In the Rue Jacob, sure enough, we found the wife of our conductor, and your virginal distemper ceased to clamour for the party. But Paris, I fear, consorted ill with your Cambrian blood. Do you remember the Sunday evening when we sat at dinner, and a troupe of minstrels came into the courtyard and struck up an operatic air? Did it profane the sacred echoes of Plinlimmon in your ears! You turned pale, and wept, to the bewilderment of the French people at the hotel table, while the musicians took your emotion as a tribute to their harmony and played with unusual feeling. I recall, too, your horror when I donned a scarlet fez, and sallied forth with the preceptor to a ball in the students' quarter. Did you see flames leaping from that harmless headpiece, which had been slipped into my portmanteau by a maternal hand?

TO WINIFRED EVANS.

*Her moral
example.*

At the ball I had a new experience, Winifred, and I will confess to you that it staggered me. The whole company stood up for the quadrille in two long lines. Opposite me was a comely young woman, with whom I prepared to dance after the discreet English fashion ; but at the first note of the band, she whisked the tassel of my fez across my face with—you'll scarcely credit it—the tip of a shapely shoe ! I stood transfixed. “ *Enlevez vos jambes !* ” cried the lady. I looked down the opposite line, and saw a confusion of shapely shoes in the air. On my side there was a fantastic delirium of legs. The spectacle was so startling that I could not stir ; and there must have been something piquant in the contrast between my expression and that cap of Oriental licence which you disapproved, for the quadrille was broken up, and I was surrounded by a mob of damsels with cries of “ *Pauvre petit Turc ! Où est maman ?* ”

*She is a theme
for the
Eisteddfod.*

Do not take this confession amiss, Winifred Evans, for it is my homage to your memory. At that moment I was overshadowed by the propriety of Plinlimmon ; its peaks of decorum towered above me ; from its crags your spiritual hand beckoned me out of the Mænad throng. Does this not console you for

ON MURAL TABLETS.

the absence of that party? If you have locked in the recesses of your bosom all these years the true story of that excursion to Paris, can you not tell it now to your neighbours with the candour of which I have set an example? Plinlimmon will not wrap its blushing summit in a cloud. Nay, the tale of your error and my moral stupefaction might furnish a theme for a cantata to an aspiring Welsh bard, and cheer the next Eisteddfod with an unwonted gush of life.

ON MURAL TABLETS.

*A vindication
of Smith.*

THERE are certain houses which I never pass without desiring to adorn them with a mural inscription. Some otherwise uninteresting dwellings are made illustrious by tablets which certify that historical personages once lived there. My inscription would be equally chaste and simple: "Here L. F. A. was ill," followed by the date. This would be no arrogant assertion of distinction; nor should I desire that the owners of the houses in question should allot a space on their walls for my exclusive use. Other

ON MURAL TABLETS.

initials might stamp their melancholy record of bygone trial over the doorway. The idea is not to be deprecated, like the cutting of names on ancient monuments; nay, it has a claim which transcends the right of Smith to deface holy and hoary memorials with his particular share of the alphabet. If it comes to that, I have never been angry with Smith since I found the names of Byron, Shelley, and old Dumas on the walls of the dungeon where the Prisoner of Chillon left his own superscription on the stones worn by his despairing tread.

*How to im-
prove London.*

But my mural tablet would be in no sense an obtrusion of mediocrity or insignificance in places dedicated to the immortals. It would be most conspicuous on the exterior of hotels and lodging-houses, which can scarcely be called Walhallas of the great departed. It would impart a spectacular interest to many flat and colourless blocks of brickwork in this city of London. It would give a sparkle to sightless windows, rarely cleaned by maids-of-all-work, and festoon with evergreens of memory those rusty heralds of news from the outer world, which are wont to resound in the sick man's ear with the postman's knock or the phlegmatic summons of the tax-collector.

ON MURAL TABLETS.

*Jam-pudding
without jam.* My particular tablet would affix
itself first to a house in a dingy
square, consecrated to flitting phantoms of the
impecunious. I do not remember the number ;
but I walk that way sometimes, hoping that a
door will open and reveal a fragile little woman
with anxious eyes, which have a strained look, as
if they were always striving to see the rent of
dubious lodgers by a process of clairvoyance.
Where art thou, mistress of the art of making
jam-pudding without jam, tenacious of coal and
frugal of candle, struck to the heart by dread lest
the ailing denizen of the top-floor-back should be
smit with a fell disease which would make com-
panion-lodgers fly, and would offer to thy poverty
the horrid incense of disinfectants ? Where is thy
dirgeful daughter, who accompanied on the piano
the slow weeks of my convalescence with a melody
which struggled through the preliminary bars, and
then fell dead lame ?

*An apprentice
of discord.* How that hobbling tune comes back
to me, with a sort of wondering lament
that the fingers of thy child were apprenticed to
discord instead of the cutlery and the cruets ! At
fourteen she might have been a neat-handed Phyllis
with a table-cloth and its appurtenances ; but thou
must needs set her on a music-stool, to strum agony

ON MURAL TABLETS.

into imprisoned auditors! Was it with the hope that, by and by, her graces and accomplishments might win the heart of some Fortunatus who paid his rent promptly every Saturday? Had the morning practice of thy little maid an accent of reproach to the sick detrimental upstairs, as if she said, "What's the good of my learning to charm a desirable lodger if you are going to have typhoid?" I wonder whether she was ever borne upwards on the mangled quavers of that hapless composition to the matrimonial pinnacle of thy dreams. Well, I would gladly tender my tablet as a peace-offering if the right door in that dingy square were to open and let in this flood of memories.

*Patience on a
monument.*

The mural memento shifts to a lodging kept by a spinster landlady of mature charms, who was reported to be awaiting the advent of a truant adorer long since vanished on the high seas. It was vaguely understood that he was seeking for buried treasure in the Spanish Main, and that when this came to light, he would return, laden with antique gems, to decorate this patience on a monument, who, meanwhile, took in boarders, and blushed when the conversation turned on the business of sea-faring. The company at her table somehow sustained this romantic ideal. There was a gentleman with a bald head and prominent

ON MURAL TABLETS.

eyes, believed to be the rightful owner of vast wealth, which he was kept out of by a wicked uncle, who had even gone the length of putting him in a lunatic asylum, on the flimsy pretext of a sunstroke in India. Regularly every morning he set forth to consult his lawyers, who were doing battle with the uncle at a vast expense ; and every evening there was a flutter of expectation that the bald head, over which hovered the aureole of coming riches, would shine upon us as a certificated cranium of a millionaire.

The glory of dowagers. Two or three dowagers graced these possibilities of splendour with anecdote of rank and fashion ; and a youthful Teuton, with a terrific appetite, laid the foundation of an alien capitalist's fortune by preying on the spinster landlady's attenuated commissariat. I was the only skeleton at the feast ; yet was it a crime, O mature spinster waiting for a laggard love, to fall ill in such a household ? Did you think that the bald-headed litigant would be frightened away, that the dowagers and their anecdotes would take wing, or that the sailor might come home with his argosy, and hold you demeaned by such an unworthy patient ? Many years have passed, and you may be clothed now with the luxury of Spanish galleons ; but if you would care to have

ON MURAL TABLETS.

a touching relic of the old days, my unpretending tablet is at your service.

*Frailty of
bell-ropes.*

Another memory of inopportune sickness shapes itself into a queer old barrack of a Paris hotel. It was a vast place, full of dim corridors, haunted by a lean and slippered old gentleman, who received my profuse apologies with haughty silence when I trod on his toes in the dark. He occupied the room next to mine, and proclaimed a violent cold with trumpet blasts on an aquiline nose. So far as I knew, we were the only visitors, and, as I crept past the grim and silent array of bedrooms, I felt like the calendar prince in the Arabian story, who was left alone in the enchanted palace, and had the inquisitive hardihood to mount the coal-black steed, which carried him off in the air, and flicked out his eye with its bushy tail. I had to spend a good deal of time in the corridors, because the bell in my room was proof against the most vigorous tugging. Every other day a smiling youth would come with many implements, and fix a new bell-rope, which came off at the first essay of manly impatience, what time I needed breakfast or hot water.

*A mariner or
a monkey.*

In the upper regions of the barrack, without a bell, I was as hopelessly cut

ON MURAL TABLETS.

off from civilisation as if I were lost in the desert, like the hero of Balzac's tale. To him there came a leopard which relieved his solitude with a strange and frightful affection, as of a huge cat, hunted for him, and brought him food in the shape of bleeding carcasses of freshly mangled beasts. I was reminded of this cheerful episode by a picture in my room of a horse torn to pieces by a lion. But there was no friendly leopard in the corridor, only the lean and slippered old gentleman, who stalked past me like an apparition in an overcoat disclosing bare legs. I followed him till we came to a landing where there was an eager and a nipping air from open windows. From the stairs above hung a cord, and clinging to this like a mariner or a monkey, he produced a deafening roar of brass from a gong overhead, to which the concierge far below responded with an inquiring shriek.

*A strange
"Bools."* I have often thought that in many of those silent rooms might have been found skeletons, with mouldering bell-ropes in their hands. This fancy must have been strong upon me when I woke with a start one morning to hear a heavy step in the passage. It sounded like somebody staggering under a heavy load. I opened my door, and saw a man with a huge basket full of skulls. He looked at me with a grim smile, shook

ON MURAL TABLETS.

his head, murmuring "*À la bonne heure,*" and dropped a skull at the next door, as if it were a pair of boots! This operation was repeated all along the corridor, till there were rows of shining skulls in the dim light, some doorways having two, one smaller than the other, evidently a woman's.

*A clamour
of skeletons.* Suddenly every door opened, as by a given signal, and headless skeletons stooped and picked up the skulls. Then there was a commotion; the corridor was swiftly alive and white with flying bones; the man with the basket was surrounded by a mob of horrid figures, striving to adjust skulls that would not fit, and thrusting them into his perplexed face. It was the smaller skulls, I noticed, that excited the most vehement protest. Clearly, the unfortunate domestic had polished them all, and left them at the wrong doors, especially the feminine head-pieces, which were now so vociferous! I longed to intervene, and point out that he could not be expected to distinguish one skull from another with even approximate accuracy, when a kindly voice murmured in my ear, "*Mon Dieu! Monsieur is very ill!*"

*The new
Quivote.* It was the lean and slippered old gentleman, no longer mute and haughty, but full of sympathy for the condition

THE AFTER-DINNER ORATOR.

of his fellow-wanderer in this Sahara. He sat on the edge of my bed with a melancholy dignity as of a new Quixote, fresh from successful tilting at gongs, and wrapped in his shabby old coat, with its disclosure of legs. I explained to him the unreasonableness of our skeleton neighbours in making such a fuss about the mislaying of their skulls. Was it not a happy accident, conducive to the gaiety of anatomical research, that a young scone should sit upon old shoulders? He listened curiously, nodded with grave acquiescence, and then departed in quest of a doctor and cooling medicine. When I affix my memorial tablet to that hotel, I should like to find my slippered Samaritan, and decorate him too. A ribbon in his button-hole, with the device of a skull, a gong, and a pair of bare but chivalrous legs, would, I fancy, remind him pleasantly of a delirious stranger and a good deed.

THE AFTER-DINNER ORATOR.

Morality of his office. “OH ay, humour is nothing if it be not fed. Didst thou never hear that? It’s a common phrase, ‘Feed my humour.’” A

THE AFTER-DINNER ORATOR.

cynic, especially a cynic with no gift of speech, might say that the social performers who are put up after dinner to feed the humour of the company play but a sorry part. The actor who paints his face and assumes a character which does not belong to him is sometimes treated as a whipping-post for superior philosophy ; yet his business in the universal comedy savours no more of indignity than that of the professional after-dinner speaker who gains applause by agreeably fooling in his own person. The musicians and singers who often provide melody at public dinners might be said to degrade music to the function of tickling the ear of an over-fed alderman ; but how is this a less worthy employment than that of assisting his digestion by humorous oratory ?

*He must be
a humorist.* For your after-dinner speaker, if he is to attain distinction, and to be eyed with the genial expectation of repletion, when the dozen courses or so have been consumed, and the moment has come for coffee, cigars, and the flow of soul, must, above all things, be a humorist. There are certain toasts, no doubt, which demand a ponderous decorum. Nobody except Mr. Bernard Shaw would venture to be playful in responding for the British Army ; and the Navy requires a style of speech which suggests the rolling

THE AFTER-DINNER ORATOR.

of an ironclad in a heavy sea. But when these formalities are disposed of, the patriotism of the table relaxes, and every man settles himself in the most comfortable posture for the enjoyment of the humorist who is generally taken with a liqueur. As he sits with his impromptus in large print before him, or tries to recapture a fugitive jest which has secreted itself in some corner of his brain tissue, he knows that the buzz of conversation is about himself and his bygone triumphs, that many of these men are callously speculating whether he will be equal to a repute which, perchance, is slightly on the wane, and that beneath the dazzling candour of some shirt-fronts there lurks a serpent of envy which would dearly like to hiss the smallest symptom of failure.

*Delicacy of
his prestige.* For nothing is so delicate and so evanescent as the prestige of the after-dinner orator. You may deliver a dull lecture at the Royal Institution without any appreciable loss of credit ; you may write a poor novel, once in a way, without losing your hold on the virtuous subscribers to the circulating libraries ; but if you are a post-prandial humorist, and make one speech which fails to satisfy the spiritual trinity of coffee, cigar, and liqueur, your character is gone, probably beyond recall.

THE AFTER-DINNER ORATOR.

His laborious studies. With so much at stake, it behoves the humorist to be equipped at all points. This needs no inconsiderable amount of study, especially as he must cultivate two manners—the classic and the familiar. The classic manner is adopted on occasions when the company must be addressed as a multitude, and the humour must be of a broadly impersonal kind. The familiar manner, which is much more difficult, and demands an inconceivable care in preparation, is reserved for small dinner parties, where the persiflage is expected to have an individual application, and a chance remark may call for an immediate touch of spontaneous intellect. To prepare yourself for this emergency you must find out from your host, in a casual way, several days before the dinner, the names of the other guests. If any of them are well known to you, it is easy to have a little store of badinage ready for their behoof. As for the strangers, when you learn a little of their personal history, you are armed with a few adroit compliments which will give them a gratifying opinion of your taste and discernment.

His spontaneous inspiration. A simple-minded auditory — and they are generally simple-minded in regard to the exercise of a gift which is so rare in this inarticulate island—may be persuaded that

THE AFTER-DINNER ORATOR.

your speech is entirely extemporaneous. This amiable delusion is specially fostered by the device of provoking interruption. You hazard in the airiest way some opinion which is sure to excite an irrepressible comment ; and then, after an admirably simulated pause for reflection, most skilfully timed, you favour the delighted assembly with a good thing which has cost you sleepless nights. There are some frightful ordeals in the course of your apprenticeship to the digestive humour. There is, for instance, the moment when the chairman sends a hurried message from the other end of the room that he has been compelled to vary the toasts, but he knows that a practised speaker like yourself does not mind that, and will you be so good as to propose the health of the Fijian Ambassador, instead of responding for “ Literature and the Drama ? ”

*A horrible
dilemma.*

In such a dilemma any loss of nerve is fatal ; and the only salvation lies in some special knowledge of Fiji, which you are not likely to have, or in the suggestion that the Fijians are probably unfamiliar with the proverb that “ Too many cooks spoil the broth,” because their superfluous cooks can always be popped into the pot—a sparkling fancy, but not quite opportune ; or you can boldly deliver your prepared speech,

THE AFTER-DINNER ORATOR.

with a few trifling alterations which suggest that you are looking at our literature and drama from the Ambassador's point of view, and that his health has been greatly benefited by the spectacle. At the best, however, this is a ticklish situation, and it simply proves that the professional humorist of the table must lead one of the most laborious of lives. He must never go out to dinner without carrying in his head every imaginable speech for every possible emergency. He must be ready for any toast, from the health and prosperity of the latest Arctic expedition to the long life and happiness of a nonagenarian. He may think himself fortunate in the prospect that the toast of "The Ladies" will soon fall into disuse; but, as the stronger sex are sure to make a practice of proposing "The Gentlemen," he will find that the duty of response imposes on him the necessity of inventing an entirely new humour which shall not offend the divided skirt.

*The American
orator.*

In England it is possible for the after-dinner speaker to maintain a decent subsistence on the esteem of his fellow-creatures who are innocent of the guile which goes to the making of extemporaneous utterance. But in America he finds himself in a different atmosphere. The American is born with a loquacity not merely

THE AFTER-DINNER ORATOR.

after dinner, but at any moment during that meal. As Pindar “lisped in numbers,” so the American baby delivers his sentiments after, or in the intervals of, the feeding-bottle with equal facility. When he grows up, he regards dinner as the adjunct to eloquence, and not as the indispensable preliminary. The Englishman expects to have his food in peace, however troubled he may be by the thought of inevitable toasts ; but the American may launch into oratory immediately after the soup, and prefer a rhapsody to the *entrée*.

His deep-laid plot. I have an awful recollection of a convivial evening in Philadelphia, when the chairman rose in the middle of the oysters, and expatiated on the virtues of a guest named Riley, which apparently could not wait for the rest of the repast. Mr. Riley’s acknowledgment of this impatient enthusiasm was preceded by an incantation :—

“ This is Mr. Riley,
Who is spoken of so highly,
And who lives at an hotel.”

After this the dinner proceeded for a course or two, and then a man, who had no outward sign of barbarity about him, sprang from his seat and plunged into a discourse which began with the

THE AFTER-DINNER ORATOR.

Wars of the Roses, and came down by easy stages to the innocent visitor from England who was sitting opposite to him. It was as if a member of the Holy Inquisition had suddenly found himself stretched upon the rack by unexpected practitioners.

*Why the art is
not taught.*

This is an experience which is useful, if humiliating. The after-dinner oracle, who has survived the varied ordeals between Delmonico's and Denver, may consider himself a master of all the subtleties of improvised imposture. You will observe that he never seeks to impart the secret of his aptitude. Professors of extempore speaking do not advertise themselves on the front page of the *Athenæum* along with the seductive initials which offer the editorship of a flourishing periodical in return for a little capital. The reason must be that the tradition of spontaneity on your legs after dinner is too precious to be bartered for dross.

AT OLIVIA'S CLUB.

Olivia's brain.

MUSING, one morning in September, in the social desert of Piccadillia Infelix, I descried Olivia gazing into the window

AT OLIVIA'S CLUB.

of a print-shop. Olivia, you must know, is one of our brightest story-tellers, a sparkling journalist with her face in the glass of fashion, and her brain in the woman's movement. The convolutions of Olivia's brain, as I have often told her, would furnish exciting themes to the British Association. Science, at all events, could desire no more decisive refutation of the ancient belief that woman was evolved from anything so material and prosaic as a rib of Adam's.

*She asks me
to lunch.*

"You have caught me looking for ideas," said Olivia. "This window is a perfect warren of them; prints of hunting scenes and steeplechases, with jokes that would tax the strongest intellect. I shall really have to write on the steeplechase as an esoteric cult of humour."

I murmured that I, too, was in search of ideas, and that I had found *her*.

"That won't profit you much," said Olivia, "unless I throw in lunch. You had better come along to my club."

*An alarming
forecast.*

There was a time when lunching at a woman's club was humbling to masculine pride. How could man ever reconcile himself to the situation of guest in such a case, to being asked what pleased him most on the bill of fare,

AT OLIVIA'S CLUB.

to seeing his hostess calmly paying the bill ? The horrid thought haunted him that this, perhaps, was the forerunner of a revolution that would change the relative positions of the sexes, and doom him to be taken out and fed at places where he could not abuse the food and bully the waiters ! When this speculation first flashed across my mind, I muttered, in the immortal words of old Eccles in the play, " O society ! O class legislation ! Shall this be ? " Since then I have recovered my equanimity, and now an occasional visit to Olivia's club is a guarantee of a keen appetite later in the day. I would not for worlds let her know this, nor that her club makes me wonder at the innate docility of women even in the midst of their most adventurous pioneering.

*A backsliding
Number.*

In the hall Olivia stopped to read some club notices, written in a bold, despotic hand. " Members are cautioned," ran one of them, " against leaving handkerchiefs, handbags, and other articles, lying about the rooms. These make needless trouble for the servants. A hair-pin, believed to be the property of Number 254, has been given in charge of the hall-porter." At that moment a small packet, containing the offending relic, was handed to Olivia, who said, with a sigh—

AT OLIVIA'S CLUB.

"You see I am the culprit. How is one to be always thinking of one's hair-pins in moods of intellectual abstraction?"

"This reformatory of yours seems to be rather severely managed," I ventured to remark. "If you have a number, why not a uniform, such as is worn in her Majesty's homes for undisciplined citizens?"

"You do not understand the educational system of a woman's club," said Olivia. "Our proprietor has a great idea of social equality. We have discarded our names here because they may have associations which gratify unseemly pride. You cannot give yourself airs on a number. You behold in me 254, a poor journalist; but 253 lives in Belgrave Square, and is heiress to millions. I don't want any lessons in humility, but she does."

A remote ideal. "And I suppose she is convinced now that the unequal distribution of wealth is a social curse, and that she must divide her millions, giving you a share?"

"Well, no," said Olivia, pensively. "She has not reached that state of grace yet—in fact, we are not on speaking terms, and glare at each other; but you must give the system time."

"At my club," I said, "a notice in the hall

AT OLIVIA'S CLUB.

about stray hair-pins would cause the stairs to run with the blood of the Committee."

*The truth about
men's clubs.*

"Men have such savage instincts," she responded. "One of our Numbers gave us a lecture on men's clubs. She said that when a man is discontented with his food, which is mostly always, he backs his bill for a fabulous amount, which the Committee have to pay. That is why your clubs are usually wound up."

"A nice, well-informed Number she must be!"

"Yes, she got all the information from her brother. She said, too, that the wine in a man's club is so strong that the unfortunate servants who draw the corks are often overpowered by the fumes of alcohol."

*The doom of
a traitor.*

"Ah!" I murmured bitterly, "I knew some traitor would betray us. That Number's brother will be found in the Thames before long with a corkscrew in his heart!"

"The revelation made a deep impression here," continued Olivia, with a suspicious twinkle in her eye. "The proprietor took our wine-list home, and edited it with great rigour. A whole cellarful of the choicest vintages was sent away next

AT OLIVIA'S CLUB.

morning. I fear you can't have anything very stimulating with your lunch."

*Bacchus at
Olivia's club.*

I took up the wine-list, and perceived at once the signs of editorial labour. If you can imagine Bacchus grown thin and ascetic, with an inclination towards vegetarianism, and a habit of taking the waters at a German Spa, you will form some idea of the wine-list at Olivia's club. From a moderately joyous calendar of the grape it had been transformed to a forbidding catalogue of tinctures. Nothing was left but a few acidulated juices which only an extravagant fantasy would call wines, and which Timothy would certainly have avoided "for his stomach's sake."

*Truth does not in-
habit a bottle.*

"It seems to me," I said to Olivia, "that the spiritual director of this club sent away the choicest vintages because she didn't believe in them. From the glimpses you have given me of her character, I should say that she is determined to uphold the Truth above all things. Now, there is no greater error than the classical assertion—*in vino veritas*. I do not know whether Truth ever inhabited the bottom of a well; but she is certainly not to be found at the bottom of a bottle. Here, then, is a cardinal

AT OLIVIA'S CLUB.

difference between your club and mine. Men still pretend that the wine-list is the register of sterling veracity. The shifting aliases of the choicest vintages are accepted as implicitly as the genealogies in Debrett. Every night I see old gentlemen, who, perchance, have spent the day in transactions not always consistent with the strictest probity, studying the wine-list as if it were a Messianic revelation. Their features, disturbed by the cares or crimes of commerce, assume an expression of holy peace. Bottles are brought to them reposing in baskets, with the innocence of an infant in its cradle, and they imbibe some decoction of liquorice and senna as if it were nectar from a celestial bin.

*A little brandy,
please !* “Now mark the superior candour
of your wine-list, and the subtlety of
its discretion. Everything that might mislead the
virginal palate is banished ; what remains, were it
accused of being wine, might honestly plead an
alibi. Any Bacchanalian flavour it may ever have
possessed has long departed from it. It is like
those temperance beverages which don the livery
of alcohol, and straightway forget what manner
of drinks they really are. Yes, Olivia, your
spiritual director is a woman of uncommon intellect.
The fair and gracious Numbers who drink the

AT OLIVIA'S CLUB.

liquids she has vouchsafed to them will say to themselves, 'And this is what Man calls wine !' and will despise him all the more. I declare your proprietor ought to be called the Ignatius Loyola of the woman's movement. She shows you Man still wallowing in his wine-list, still believing, poor creature, that his potions are pure ; and she gives you a prescription, as unseductive as an advertisement of chemicals. I admire her. I want to drink her health. No, thank you ; not in any of the tipples here set forth. It is good for a man to come to your club ; so, if you don't mind summoning one of the warders of this house of correction, I should like to christen my new-born ecstasy with a little brandy."

*No brandy unless
you faint.*

The warder, a solemn young woman in a pinafore, and a cap which was starched into a transcendental primness, stared at me with a frown, then went behind a screen and said—

"No. 254's guest wants brandy."

"Is he ill ?" demanded a cold, stern voice.

"No."

"Then what does he want brandy for ?"

"He says he likes it."

"Tell him," said the voice, "that brandy is not served except to Numbers or guests in a dead faint."

AT OLIVIA'S CLUB.

The last kick. “You had better have a swoon,” suggested Olivia.

“My dear Number,” I replied, “you do not make any allowance for the effect of a regenerating atmosphere. That craving for brandy was transient—the last kick, so to speak, of a froward spirit. I shall return to my club with quite a missionary fervour. If you don’t mind, I will take with me this bill of fare, and propose it to the Committee as a regimen for our self-indulgent gourmets who are imperilling the cause of Man’s supremacy. I believe the plain living and high thinking of women’s clubs are more likely to bring about a social revolution than the public exercises of the New Woman. You see, the whole theory of a man’s club is contrary to the elements of modern progress. It is a place for luxury and wassail. Nearly all the talk is of food and liquor. You will scarcely believe it, but I have known the eloquence of one entire meal devoted to the comparative merits of fried whiting and salmon *en souchet*, and to anecdotes of the soups at all the clubs in Pall Mall. Two eminent men of my acquaintance quarrelled irreparably because one of them maintained that the oyster soup at the Junior United Bottle-holders was made with guttapercha, and the other swore that it was the best kamptulicon !”

AT OLIVIA'S CLUB.

*Olivia betrays the
cause of woman.*

Olivia toyed with her bread, and sighed. "It is awfully treacherous of me," she whispered, "but I will tell you a secret." She glanced around, as if fearful of being overheard by the transcendental starch, which was nodding ominously in a corner. "The truth is that we are not all plain-livers and high-thinkers. I know quite a lot of Numbers who eat a great deal at restaurants whenever they get the chance. I've a frightful appetite myself, especially for everything indigestible—what the newspapers call *recherché*."

"The cause of Man is saved!" I said. "Do you think you will be very hungry this evening about seven-thirty?"

"Certain," said she.

"So shall I. We'll celebrate the strange coincidence!"

With this plot on their unshriven souls, two guilty creatures stole out of Olivia's club.

"Number 254 has all her wits about her, if not her hair-pins," she remarked, as we passed the notices in the hall.

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